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There Was a Fortune in that Badlands Mine,  
but a Hang-Noose Awaited the Finder!

35c

# Gunsmoke GOLD



Complete  
and  
Unabridged

**TOM WEST**

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## IT TAKES MORE THAN FIRE AND BULLETS TO STOP A TEXAS MAVERICK!

When hired hardcases burned out Tex Taylor's little Arizona spread, they figured they had seen the last of him. They forgot that it takes more than flaming torches and hot lead to throw a scare into a Lone Star State cowboy. But when Tex got set to strike back, he learned that bullets bearing his name can also come from less obvious sources, especially when outlaws are roaming the hills and the maddening smell of new-found gold is in the air.

Tom West does it again in this hoof-thundering novel of bullet-fast action. GUNSMOKE GOLD is packed with outlaw riders, Apache raiders, gold-hunting adventurers, and all the thrills of a top-notch Western.

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*Turn this book over for the second  
complete Ace Western novel*

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## *Cast of Characters*

**TEX TAYLOR:** An ex-cowhand who lost everything he had—except guts.

**COYOTE CAL:** Men hungered for his secret, but death got to it first.

**MARGERY LAWSON:** The fact that she was a member of the “weaker” sex didn’t make any difference to a .44.

**CHEROKEE:** This part-Indian knew more than his crafty eyes would tell.

**PEEWEE:** He was a poet of the range, but in a pinch he was no “long hair.”

**WHYTHINGTON-SMYTHE:** An Englishman without guns, he carted a strange cargo.

*and plenty more, including Apaches, desperadoes, cowboys, and lawmen.*

**TOM WEST**

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**GUNSMOKE**  
**GOLD**

**ACE BOOKS, INC.**

**23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.**

## GUNSMOKE GOLD

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## TERROR RIDES THE RANGE

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## CHAPTER 1

LIKE the vicious cracking of a distant bull whip, the gunshots cut through to Tex Taylor's consciousness as he lay between his soogans. Alert on the instant, he slid softly out of his bunk onto the beaten earth floor of the peeled pole cabin. Fumbling in the darkness, he found his boots, yanked them on, buckled his gunbelt and moved towards the narrow doorway. Outside, approaching dawn showed luminous in the eastern sky, but night still lingered, to grey his surroundings like a fog, a chilly fog, through which the raw timbers of his new barn, the bulky pile of stacked hay and the drooping willows that bordered Rattlesnake Creek showed dim. Eyes probing, he stood in the doorway, but there was no sign of movement in his field of vision save a chittering squirrel, scurrying up a tree trunk.

Troubled by a vague unease, he gathered an armful of kindling, re-entered the cabin and set his coffee pot on the stove. The coffee was beginning to bubble when his saddle pony nickered.

He lifted his Stetson from a peg and ghosted out into the greyness, moving softly on the balls of his feet. Beyond the cleared space that fronted the cabin, a buckskin stood motionless in a pole corral, head up and ears pricked.

Silently, the nester moved across the clearing. Suddenly, he froze at sound of creaking saddle leather in his rear. His right hand dropped to the butt of a swivelled forty-five at his hip and he pivoted—fast. But not fast enough. A rider, astride a big black, almost shadowed him. In the dim light, horse and rider seemed gigantic. The Texan stared into the muzzle of a Winchester, slanted across the horn.

"Beat it, nester!" The command was as cold and unemotional as the blank face of the rider.

Tex's grip tightened spasmodically upon the smooth wood of his gun butt. His lean body tautened. Bristling with bitter resentment, he braced for the draw. But his hand dropped

reluctantly away as the jingle of other bit chains and dull thud of shod hooves filtered to his ears from the gloom around. This was no one-man show. He knew "Silent" Sanders, foreman of Rock Robertson's Circle R, now staring at him from atop the big gelding, long horselike features as bare of expression as a barn door, lantern jaw moving rhythmically as he champed upon a chew of tobacco. Silent was a dangerous hombre to fool with. The Circle R foreman was tough as sun-dried rawhide and cold-blooded as a bullfrog. He had to be tough to ramrod a hardcase spread like Rock's.

"Say!" came back the Texan tightly, "You can't run me off! I filed on this quarter—regular. It's government range."

Sanders spat. "Beat it!" he repeated tonelessly.

Tex glanced quickly around. Daylight was stronger now. Five more grey-shirted punchers had drifted into the clearing. They ringed him, sitting easily in their high-pommelled stock saddles and watching him with blank eyes. One had a bloodied bandana wrapped roughly around his right forearm.

The nester spread his hands in a gesture of appeal. "Whyfore is the Circle R running me off, Silent? I done rode clear of your range, never butchered a steer, nor hazed a Circle R cow."

Again the foreman ejected a brown stream of tobacco juice, a trifle wearily. "Punch the breeze! Boss's orders!"

"You got no right to run me off!" The Texan's tones were edged. He glared around at the circle of silent riders like a cornered cougar. "The U. S. Government says I can pre-empt one-sixty acres, and I done it lawful."

"How long do we stick around while this lousy nester runs off at the mouth," inquired a burly young fellow, forking a restive roan, with harsh impatience. Tex's gaze shifted to him, took in the square, beefy features, the straggling mustache that only partially hid a loose-lipped, querulous mouth. He knew this rider, too, Bull, Rock Robertson's only son, heir to the vast Circle R holdings, but with no more authority than a hired cow hand. Hard drinker, gambler and libertine, Bull was a spoiled brat grown to man's size, in whom his father's



weaknesses were magnified and virtues buried. Again, the fingers of the hard-pressed nester's right hand caressed his gun butt, with scarce-suppressed impulse.

"Hold it!" barked Sanders, whose shrewd eyes missed nothing. He eased up the Winchester so that it was levelled full upon the bedeviled nester's chest, jerked his head towards the buildings. "Get going!" he told a puncher.

Helpless, the Texan watched two riders step down. One jingled to the cabin, while the other waddled towards the stacked hay.

In minutes the hay was a roaring bonfire. Flying cinders showered upon the roof of the barn beside it and it, too, was quickly transformed into a raging furnace. The cabin was afire now, its interior glowing crimson.

Scorching waves of heat rolled from the burning buildings and drove the watching riders back to the far side of the clearing, herding the Texan like a steer in their midst. Smoke ascended in a black column, wavering up into a cloudless sky, where it mushroomed and hung into sooty clouds—over a funeral pyre that marked the death of a lone nester's dreams.

No further word was spoken as the raiders sat slack in their saddles, watching. The roar of flames, punctuated by the crackle of dry timber and tinged by the low hiss of swift-burning hay, steadily gained volume.

Abruptly, at a sign from Sanders, the Circle R punchers gave the uneasy ponies their heads, thundered across the clearing, beat through the smoke-shrouded brush and hit Rattlesnake Creek. Spray rose in glistening curtains as the ponies plunged through the stream. Dust billowed when they hit the further bank and scrambled up its sandy slope. When the air finally cleared, there was no sight of the raiders, beyond six streamers, floating lazily across the flats, churned up by the hooves of their fast-cantering ponies.

For a while, the nester stood motionless, eyeing the blazing spread. So sudden and unexpected had been the Circle R raid that, even now, he found it hard to believe he was not held

in the grip of a horrible nightmare. A breeze souged across the flat, and enveloped him in thick smoke. Choking, he moved quickly towards the pole corral. A buckskin with four white stockings had retreated to the further side, whinnying with fear. The Texan squeezed between the rails, lashed with rawhide. With soothing talk, he led the trembling animal out of the gate. Slowly, mechanically, he smoothed a folded blanket across its back, dropped a double-cinched Texas saddle into place, fingered a latigo. Slipping in the bit, he turned and eyed the burning buildings with reddened, smoke-smarting eyes. A year's hard work and ten years gathering gone up in smoke. It sure made a dandy bonfire, he considered, with dreary humor.

Then he swung into leather and headed eastward, following the curves of the creek—a tall rider, slimmed by hard work into whipcord wiriness, with stubborn mouth and grey eyes in which the eager resiliency of youth was now filmed over by a weary resignation. Lean-featured, skin tanned and crinkled by the stinging heat of the plains. With boots that showed thin at the soles, patched corduroys and battered Stetson dark-stained with the sweat of lonely trails. Just another nester run off by Rock Robertson's Circle R as carelessly as a man might brush a fly off a wall, and the irony of it was that there was even less personal feeling involved. Nesters were pests, that's all, to be cleaned out like wolves or rattlesnakes.

As he jogged beneath the willows, the Texan's thoughts were somber. Behind him, crackling into embers, was the fruit of years of stern self-denial, years of sweat and struggle breasting the Chisholm Trail, breaking broncs, nursing cows. Where his pards had lavished their wages upon dancehall jades and staked them against gimlet-eyed gamblers, he had hoarded every dollar. He had eaten in two-bit restaurants, slept in livery barns, winced at taunts of Tightwad Taylor—all to bring into reality a cherished dream, a dream now guttering into ashes behind him.

He could still thrill at the memory of the final pay day in Dodge City, when he turned his pony's head west, with high

hopes and a hefty money-belt. His goal had been virgin country where grass was good and land could be had for the filing. He found it on Rattlesnake Creek, in the sparsely settled Arizona Territory. His money-belt shrank, but his dream took shape. He had his own spread. No trail boss could roust him out at midnight, shivering under a wet slicker, to circle an uneasy herd. No man could dispossess him.

The Texan's lips curved in a bitter smile. That's what the statutes said. They didn't take into account the fact that King Colt was law west of the Pecos and that in the eyes of the big cowmen, a nester was one degree lower than a skunk.

Always he had ridden a straight trail, considered the solitary rider. He had sweated every dollar he ever made. And what had it got him? A burnt-out spread. Law meant nothing to Rock Robertson and his kind. They wrote their own law—six-gun law.

As he rode, a growing resentment bit deep into the musing Texan.

## CHAPTER 2

MORE smoke smudged the sky—now brilliant blue—over the tree tops ahead. This would be the Lawson layout, conjectured the rider. Lanky's pre-emption bordered his to the north, along the creek. Seemed like the Circle R had cleaned up complete. Lank Lawson was a stubborn, belligerent Kentuckian, and his red-headed daughter had plenty of spunk. Maybe they had made trouble. Tex shook the buckskin into a faster pace, a quick anxiety smothering thought of his own misfortune.

The story was plain to his searching eyes as the pony shouldered through a stand of aspen, into the clearing where the Lawson place had stood. Cabin and lean-to barn were reduced to ashes. A wagon had been capsized and an attempt made to burn it. The bed was charred and the greyed canvas hung from the hoops in smouldering strips. The carcass of a huge, rough-coated dog lay by the wagon, its head smashed

by a slug. There was no sign of life and a dank odor of smoke hung on the air. Set still in the saddle, eyes probing, Tex remembered the wounded puncher. Chances were that Lanky Lawson had put up a fight and the Circle R bunch got their hackles up.

Movement down by the creek caught his eye. He touched his pony with the spur and it danced nervously past the smouldering embers. Drawing close to the low-spread willows, he sighted the still bulk of a man stretched on the creek bank. Beside it was the crouched form of a girl. The rising sun spun a golden halo around her hair. At sound of the pony's approach, she straightened. Her eyes were reddened, and tears had traced smudged courses down her rounded cheeks. It took more than that to mar Margery Lawson's charm, decided the Texan, gazing down at the small figure, graceful even in a man's shabby flannel shirt and faded blue denims. Now her clear blue eyes, that could as quickly sparkle with fun as with fire, were misted with grief.

Cropped short, coppery hair clustered in thick ringlets around her head. She stood awaiting him, toil hardened, her hands slowly clenching and unclenching under stress of emotion. Margery Lawson was not beautiful as the fashion plates go, but she had more than beauty—clear eyes that gazed unafraid; an overflowing vivacity that even now glowed upon her piquant features; a sincerity that was as outspoken as it was forthright.

Tex checked the buckskin. "Your paw dead?" Fool question, he thought, but a fellow had to make some kind of talk.

The girl's head jerked with a quickness that betrayed frazzled nerves, "Yes, they shot him."

"He show fight?"

Her small fists clenched, "Of course he showed fight. So did I. Wouldn't a man fight for his own?"

"That warn't good sense," he replied gravely. "Us nesters got no more show against the Circle R than steers in a slaughterhouse."

Storm signals flashed in the girl's glistening eyes. Impet-

uously, she stepped forward, grabbed the buckskin's bit chain and stared angrily up at its rider. "Don't you dare talk like that, Tex Taylor, about a dead man," she raged. "My paw was a fighter, he stood up for his rights, he—" Words choked in her throat. She dropped the chain, cupped her face in her hands, her body shook with silent sobbing.

Tex stepped down and stood awkwardly building a smoke. The girl, he reflected, had no one left now, not even her dog. Presently, Margery Lawson's sobbing subsided. "Did—did they burn you out?" she quavered.

"Yep," he said shortly.

"What are you going to do about it?"

The Texan's shoulders raised, "What can a saddle bum do against the Circle R? Nothing, I guess."

"Then you're one heck of a man!" There was no quaver in the girl's voice now. Eyes sparkling, she stood straight, facing him in contemptuous challenge. Small chin outthrust, she continued, "You let those—wolves—smoke you out without raising a finger, then you slink away like a whipped cur. Even our dog, Panther, fought them!" Her eyes chilled, "I thought Texas bred men—not earthworms!"

The tall rider listened with unmoved features. When the girl paused to catch her breath, he inquired evenly, "Can one man cross guns with six, ma'am, when they got the drop on him?"

"Paw did!"

"And he's dead!" came back Tex dryly.

"They haven't got the drop on you now."

"Nope," he agreed.

"Then you admit you've a yellow streak down your backbone a yard wide?" she accused heatedly.

"Mebbeso," he agreed coolly. No resentment showed on his lean features. The girl, he reflected, was not responsible for her talk, she was half-crazed with grief. There was no trace of the bitterness that boiled within him when he glanced at the stiffening corpse, "I reckon it's time we quit whittle-whanging and set to work burying your paw."

Without further word, he commenced casting around for tools, found a pickaxe and a spade, with a half-burned handle near the ruins of the shack. While Margery Lawson pointedly ignored him, he dug a grave beneath the willows. The sun had cleared the jagged peaks of the Sawteeth and blasted the plain with torrid fire. Sweat rolled off the Texan and he blessed the spreading tree above him for its welcome shade.

When he judged the oblong hole was deep enough to protect the remains of his former neighbor from wolves and coyotes, he strode over to the bloodied form. They sure made a sieve out of Lanky, he mused, dragging the body over to the grave.

He was about to start shovelling in the loose dirt when he thought of the girl. Maybe she would want to say a prayer, or something. Women were curious creatures. He glanced around, but Margery Lawson was not in sight. He was still debating whether or not to go ahead, when she emerged from the bush leading an ancient cow pony, saddle-galled and spur-scratched. An admiring waddy from the Slash had given it to her, Tex recalled. The Lawsons never owned much, outside a few razorback hogs and a flock of scrawny hens.

He hailed, "Hey, ma'am! You want to say—anything afore I cover him?"

She tied the pony to a wheel of the overturned wagon, hurried towards him. Reaching the edge of the grave, she glanced down, quickly averted her face.

"Would you know the burial service?" Her voice was low. Tex, leaning on his shovel, shook his head.

Fingers interlocked, twining nervously, she hesitated. "All I know," she whispered, "Is the *Lord's Prayer*."

"I reckon that's good enough."

The girl sank upon her knees on the raw earth and bowed her head beside the open grave. Tex dropped his spade and knelt, too. He didn't know why. Clear and steadfast, the girl's voice rose into the heat-laden air, still rank with the fumes of smouldering timbers. "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will—" her

voice faltered, almost broke, "be done on earth as it is in heaven. . ."

With a final Amen she rose quickly and moved away. Tex self-consciously scrambled to his feet, grabbed the spade and started to vigorously shovel earth to cover his embarrassment. The job done, he hauled a big rock from the creek, set it for a headstone.

Margery Lawson was raking over the smoking remnants of the shack. Tex rolled a smoke and eyed her with puzzled speculation. What would this girl do now, he pondered. Like him, she had lost everything. But a man could get by, where a girl couldn't. He couldn't just ride away and leave her alone, without food or shelter. Besides, he had dreamed—forget it! he told himself savagely. What right had a saddle bum to think of marriage? What could he offer, outside a burned-out spread? Besides, she rated him mid-way between a coyote and a skunk. He sauntered towards the girl. She turned at sound of his jingling spurs and eyed him questioningly.

"Guess I got to drag it, ma'am," he drawled. "Could I side you on the trip to town?"

"No, thank you!" There was no mistaking her emphatic distaste.

"Heck, you can't set around here!"

She tossed her head, "I'll head for Skull Creek—later."

"It ain't safe to ride alone, ma'am there's talk of 'Paches on the peck." He thought, "The Apaches haven't been sighted closer than forty miles west, but maybe that will scare her."

"A man who is too chicken-hearted to draw his gun," she came back coldly, "is no protection against Apaches, red or white. I'll ride alone, thank you!"

The Texan shrugged, "As you want, ma'am."

Further down creek he pulled rein at another oblong of blackened embers. This would be Peewee's shack, he mused. Peewee the poet, a happy-go-lucky squatter who had been his partner at many a rummy session on long winter evenings. Well, it wouldn't faze Peewee, nothing ever did. Anyway, he had nothing else to lose except his horse. Everyone cottoned

to Peewee, he had been drifting around the Valley spreads for years. He'd ridden for the Circle R, too. Rock sure hadn't played any favorites.

An hour's ride brought Taylor to the cottonwood that marked the fork of Rattlesnake and Skull Creeks. He crossed Skull at the wide, sandy ford, and the buckskin plodded across dusty flats, patched with squat greasewood. Presently, he hit the stage road, curving, like a yellow serpent, through a vast carpet of grey grama.

Dust-shrouded, he drifted into Skull Creek just before noon. The cowtown was a replica of a hundred others sprawled across the sun-drenched western plains. Two rows of square-fronted, heat-blistered buildings faced the widening of the trail that was Main Street, their canopies projecting over the warped plankwalks to afford scant shade. Dust lay inches thick upon the hoof-pocked stretch of street, eternally stirred up by jogging horsemen and creaking wagons. Tied ponies stood slack-hipped at smooth-polished hitchrails, tails flicking at the swarming flies.

East of Main Street, frame houses were scattered among drooping cottonwoods; westward, across the creek jostled a welter of adobes, the Mexican quarter, noisy with yelping dogs, grunting hogs and the shrill chitter-chatter of full-skirted señoras.

The rider passed Bill Yeager's Livery, with its decrepit barn and grey-boarded corral; the sprawling Trading Post, with the usual bevy of Poke-bonnetted women gossiping under its canopy; the tin-roofed deputy sheriff's shack, set in front of the squat adobe jail. He checked his pony in front of the garish, scarlet-painted Four Aces saloon, swung stiffly out of leather and looped his reins around the rail. Idly, his eyes took in the row of tied ponies. He recognized Sander's big-boned black and Bull Robertson's roan. Quick scrutiny showed four more animals carrying the Circle R brand.

Burning out nesters was warm work, reflected the Texan bitterly. Seemed like Rock Robertson's raiders had wound up in town for a cooling drink. Or maybe they hankered to wash



the taste of their dirty work out of their mouths. His lips tightened. His hand brushed the six-gun in his holster. This time he'd take care that cat-eyed Silent Sanders didn't get the drop on him, big-mouth Bull Robertson either. The batwings squealed on gritty hinges as he pushed through, grey eyes wary.

## CHAPTER 3

TEX side-stepped swiftly inside the batwings, stood back against the wall until his eyes, dazzled by the sun-glare of the street, adjusted to the dimness of the low-ceilinged room. Quickly, the scene clarified and he scanned the saloon. At the further end of the long bar that stretched from wall to wall across its rear, Mike, the bald-headed barkeep, was setting bottles before a knot of Circle R riders. At the opposite end of the bar, a big-bodied cowman, dark-featured, with the high cheek bones of an Indian, hawk nose arcing out of a hatchet face, drank alone. His red shirt and the scarlet feather stuck in the band of his sombrero, low-tilted over cold, unwinking eyes, made a vivid patch of color against the drabness of the dark back-bar and unpainted pine walls. The handle of a sheathed knife protruded above his belt and an ivory-butted gun hung close to his dangling right hand. Tex thought of a diamondback, dangerous even in repose. Tough hombre, he decided, and transferred his attention to the remaining patrons.

There were two, one a wizened rheumy-eyed fellow, with heavy-soled knee-high prospector's boots and the grey-white alkali of the Barrens still powdering his headgear. Restless as a horsefly, reflected Tex, studying the reflection of the miner's pinched features, unshaven jowls and ever-shifting eyes, in the back-bar mirror. Flush though, judging from the heap of coin stacked on the mahogany in front of him—and soaking up rotgut like a sponge. Beside him lounged a steer of another color, strange to the Texan. He was a loose-jointed, citified individual, clad in loose-fitting tweed coat and pants, long un-

pressed, and shod with low-cut brown shoes that had once known polish. His slack form was draped across the bar so loosely that it seemed his backbone must have melted in the heat. Smooth-shaven, his features carried a slightly inane smile, and there was a whimsical quirk to the corners of his wide mouth. The wreck of a stylish grey Stetson was set upon his head at a rakish angle. He, too, was well liquored.

At a side table, a slim man in somber black coat, immaculate white shirt and black string tie, eternally shuffled and reshuffled a deck of cards, darting occasional quick glances toward the men that lined the bar. His pale features were sharp-chiselled and lips thin. He wore no guns, but a slight bulge at the left armpit of his tight-fitting coat told Tex of a hide-away. Tex knew him to be Ramon Silva, gambler and owner of The Four Aces, smooth and slick as his waxed mustache.

All this registered upon the Texan's consciousness in seconds. He was about to cross the sanded floor, when a humorous drawl, almost in his ear, checked him, "So you ain't with the angels, Tex."

He whirled in quick surprise. Seated at a table that was jammed against the fly-specked window, beside the batwings, was a chunky rider with freckled features, a flattened, misshapen nose and an infectious grin.

"Nope, but Lanky Lawson is," he came back, crunched across the floor, returned with a bottle of lukewarm beer and dropped down beside Peewee.

"Where's Marg?" inquired the chunky nester with quick anxiety.

"Hunky-dory, and riding in."

Peewee sighed deeply, "Gee, I could fall for that redheaded gal!" he gazed intently at a brass oil lamp hanging overhead, chanted rapturously.

"Love is a tender little flower  
That I would pick for Marg's bower;  
She's sweeter than the honey bee  
Yes, Margery's the gal for me."

Tex grimaced and set down his bottle. "I was hoping them Circle R wolves had scairt that fluff-duff out of you."

"Fluff-duff!" repeated Peewee indignantly, "That's poetry, genuine, one hundred per cent poetry. Some folks," he added complacently, "might call it drama, just like I been setting here watching in this saloon."

"Yep," replied Tex indifferently.

"Sure as shooting! Lamp that shrivelled up old horned toad at the bar. That's Coyote Cal. He's dirty and he's lousy, but he's got more dinero than Silva, setting over at that side table, and Silva owns this saloon and half of Skull Creek."

"You don't say!" returned Tex absently, watching the Circle R group from the corner of his eye.

"Yessiree! That old coot done located another Eldorado, back in Ghost Gulch in the Barrens. Rides into town regular each month to buy chuck, licker up and play a little poker. The dude rubbing shoulders with Coyote is a Limey, flat broke. Blew in on the stage last week, drunk, and ain't sobered up yet. The gent in the red-hot shirt, packing fancy hardware, goes by the name of Cherokee, rods a hill ranch north end of the valley. Apache maw and Spanish paw. The three of 'em—Silva, Cherokee and the dude—is stalking Coyote like hungry lobos, itching to get their teeth in his roll."

Tex forgot his own troubles as he listened to his homely pard's recital. "Wal," he demanded, "Why don't some slick jasper back-track Coyote and stake out another claim?"

Peewee grinned, "I got that idea afore you ever hit Rattlesnake. Coyote was downright sociable when I drifts into the Gulch, innocent-like. Dishes me a mug of dip and invites me to mosey around, seems I warn't the first hombre to act neighborly. But there warn't nothing there, outside of rusty machinery, old shacks and mine tailings, left by the Keweah Mining Company when it folded up."

"But you claim he has a second Eldorado," pointed out Tex, with a puzzled frown.

"You bet your life he has—if you can locate it," averred Peewee ruefully. "He ain't named Coyote for nothing." He

changed the subject abruptly, "Hell, the dude's drifting this-aways. Wal, he can't tap me. I lost all I had, and I never had nothing."

Tex looked up. The gangling Englishman was weaving towards them, teetering uncertainly between the tables and chairs that cumbered the floor. Finally, he reached the table at which the two sat, gripped its edge with both hands, swayed as though rocked by a gentle breeze, and smiled benevolently down upon them.

Peewee's gaze went to the rafters,

"If you crave cash don't look at me  
My roll won't choke a chickadee,"

he quoted.

"By jove, a cowboy Byron!" exclaimed the Dude, "A rustic troubadour!"

"I ain't no rusty two-by-four!" came back Peewee indignantly. "I'm a genuine one-hundred-per-cent poet. Two winters back I was holed in the Coyote Canyon Line Camp with no reading 'cept the labels on the air tights and a book of poems. Reckon I studied every word, frontwards and backwards in that book. Yessir, I don't need it now, I wrangle my own. Listen!" He cleared his throat:

"I am a lonesome cowpoke  
I wander o'er the range;  
I may be poor, I may be broke  
But to me it's just a joke  
Now ain't that strange?"

He eyed the Dude expectantly, "Listens pretty good, don't it? I just threw it together, carelesslike. There's eleven more verses." Again he cleared his throat.

The Dude raised a wavering hand, "Not now, old boy," he begged, "A man in my condition can only stand so much."

"Sit down before you fall down!" grunted Tex, hooking up another chair.

"Your courtesy is overwhelming," drawled the Dude, subsiding heavily. "Believe me, gentlemen, I am not inebriated. I must confess to some physical disability, yet my brain," he solemnly tapped his high forehead, "is crystal clear. The name is Wythington-Smythe, Chauncey Wythington-Smythe—hyphenated."

The two nesters drew silently upon their cigarettes.

This in no wise disconcerted the Dude. He continued to beam. "Would either of you gentlemen be interested in an excellent investment, positively gilt-edged?"

"Sure," said Peewee, "If it don't call for no dinero."

"A mere pittance, old chap, and the returns—enormous!"

"Wal, I only got a horse, and if I don't find a hole in some outfit mighty quick, I'll have to eat the horse."

The Dude wagged a long forefinger at him, "This is no occasion for idle humor. This is a business proposition, strictly on the up-and-up."

"Such as?" prompted Tex, dropping an eyelid at Peewee.

"I have been conversing with one Coyote Cal, who resides in a ghost town. He informs me that the deserted buildings are positively alive with cats, armies of cats! In fact, they are an infernal pest. He offers to pay one hundred dollars to any person who will clean them out."

Tex yawned.

"But that is not all," continued the Dude, fixing the Texan with a pained frown. "I dropped into Mineral, a mining community."

"Silver mines and smelters, 'bout thirty miles southwest," threw in Peewee for the Texan's information.

"As I was saying," droned on the Dude, with drunken gravity, "I dropped in, and—behold!—Mineral is plagued with rats. Rats so bloodthirsty that strong men cringe. And I was informed that the good citizens would pay ten dollars apiece for cats to combat the menace. Now," he absently grasped Tex's half-empty beer bottle, drained it, "if I can raise the

wherewithal to purchase a wagon and team, I shall proceed to Ghost Gulch and load up a few hundred cats, thereby earning one hundred dollars. Which said cats I proceed to convey to Mineral and sell for ten dollars apiece. Why, the whole thing is simply stupendous!"

"Drunk as a biled owl," murmured Peewee.

The Dude eyed Tex expectantly.

"No dice, Hyphen," said the Texan, with cold finality.

"Dear me!" sighed the Englishman, "Must I allow this magnificent opportunity to slip away?" He drew a slim gold watch from a pants pocket, eyed it sorrowfully, "Gift of the pater, at twenty-one." He pressed the stem. The watch chimed, a soft, mellow note. "A hunter," he explained, "made by Dent of London, quite a famous watchmaker. What am I offered?"

"I'm still broke," Tex reminded him shortly.

"Too bad, old fellow," commiserated the Dude. "To borrow money one should naturally go where money is—perhaps I should broach the matter to Coyote."

"Lamp Silva," chuckled Peewee. Tex's head swivelled. The gambler was glaring at the bar, the much-shuffled deck motionless in his well-manicured hands. The Texan followed the direction of his gaze—and suppressed a gasp of surprise. It was as though an exquisite orchid had suddenly blossomed upon a dung heap. From a rear door, a girl had entered and now stood behind the bar, bantering with the Circle R punchers. Tex thought he had never seen a prettier picture. She was a veritable Madonna, whose sleek raven tresses framed delicate oval features. A brilliant yellow, her silken dress clung close to every curve of her shapely form. A necklace of green jade circled her slender neck. One thing marred the perfection of the picture—thin, wilful lips, habitually twisted by a lingering discontent.

High pitched, with a mocking quality that held seductive challenge, her voice carried across the saloon.

The Englishman blinked and gaped, "What a delightful creature!" he ejaculated.

"Pretty little kitty," grinned Peewee, "but she's got claws.

Most scratched Bull's eyes out once when he got a mite too frisky. That's Silva's gal, Juanita. Her paw sure hates to see her around the bar.

"When a choya is in bloom  
It's sure a pretty thing  
But you just try and pick it  
Jeeze, how it can sting!"

" 'She was a Phantom of delight,' " quoted the Dude,

" 'When first she gleamed upon my sight;  
A lovely Apparition, sent  
To be a moment's ornament;  
Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair;  
Like Twilight's, too, her dusky hair;  
A dancing shape, an Image gay  
To haunt, to startle, and way-lay.' "

he hiccupped, "That, my dear sir, is poetry, not filthy doggerel."

With dignity, he restored the watch to its soft leather fob, and gingerly angled towards the bar.

There was a stir at the further end of the saloon. The Circle R riders emptied their glasses and followed their foreman's long whipcord form towards the doorway. Tex, suddenly alert, noted that two still lingered, young Bull Robertson and a hard-faced rider, with twin guns and a swivel eye.

The Circle R men stomped past Tex and Peewee without a glance, though the Texan had a strong hunch that the poker-faced foreman had followed his every move from the moment he entered the saloon.

Bull and his companion were breaking away from the bar now, jesting awkwardly with the beauteous Juanita Silva, plainly reluctant to part with her company. It was apparent that Bull had imbibed heavily. He tripped over his spurs, grabbed a chair back to steady himself and mouthed agrieved curses.

"Swivel-Eye's a bad actor. He's fast with a hawg-laig and

he's poison when he's drunk." The tolerant good humor had fled from Peewee's voice..

Tex, closely watching the stumbling, cursing Bull, dogged by the surly Swivel-Eye, saw that the latter's guns were thronged low—the earmark of a professional gunman. He quietly eased his chair back, clear of the table, slid his holster round a trifle.

Bull was close now, swearing beneath his breath and glaring around with glazed eyes. His glance passed heedlessly over the two men seated at the table beside the batwings. Returned. By some trick of fate, his blurred mind recollected the nesters whose shacks he had helped burn down that morning. He stopped and stood teetering in his high-heeled boots. Swivel-Eye, steadier, came abreast and paused, his left eye swiveling towards his burly companion, while the other, hard and unwinking, regarded the two seated riders.

"Gordamit, do you see what I see?" bellowed Bull.

"Aw, forget it!" rasped the other. "That's Peewee. You know, little Peewee, the nester from Rattlesnake Creek." He guffawed, "Peewee, the poet!"

"A nester!" roared Bull, "Ain't we cleaned all them bus-tards out of Apache Valley?"

A tenseness as brittle as thin glass gripped the saloon. Although his eyes never left the two Circle R men as he slowly straightened, Tex knew that Mike, the barkeep, was streaking for a rear door, while Juanita Silva, scarlet lips parted with rapt expectation, stood statue-like, watching with eager eyes.

The Texan had scarcely gained his feet when, as fast as a striking rattler, Swivel-Eye's right hand dipped for his gun. But the Texan was faster. Before the Circle R gunny's iron cleared leather, his thumb was wagging the hammer of his triggerless six, lancing five from the hip.

The flat plunk of the slug into Swivel-Eye's shoulder was plain, even though the thunder of the report reverberated through the saloon like the beat of a mighty drum. The Circle R man twirled, as though spun by an invisible hand. His gun exploded as it spun through the air and clattered upon a spit-



toon. He staggered towards a chair, collapsed on it, staring with dumb amazement at the fast-spreading blood stain upon his grey shirt. Apparently he felt no urge to use his twin iron.

Bull, meanwhile, was pawing at his holster, blinking in bewilderment through the reeking gunsmoke. Tex leapt at him. His gun, still smoking, swung down and the barrel smashed against the side of Bull's head. With a grunt, the hefty cowman went down like a pole-axed steer.

With the stench of burnt powder in his nostrils, Tex heard Peewee's voice, hoarse with urgency. "Get back against the wall! My Gawd, we're for it now!"

Breathing hard, gun in hand, the Texan backed away from Bull's prostrate form. There was a confused shouting outside, a drumming of spurred boots. The batwings were flung open and Silent Sanders, gun in his fist, loped in, close-followed by the three Circle R punchers.

## CHAPTER 4

CASCADING into the smoke-shrouded saloon from the sunlight outside, the Circle R riders were momentarily blinded. Sanders, in the lead, stumbled over Bull's prostrate form, recovered and blundered against Swivel-Eye, slumped on the chair. Behind him pounded the punchers. Edgy, they peered around, blinking through the swirling gunsmoke and fingering their guns. An excited yowl left the throat of one as he sighted the two silent figures, with levelled six-guns, backed against the side wall.

Tables and chairs crashed as the Circle R riders scattered and dove for cover. Sanders pivoted. A swift glance and his harsh voice cut through the confusion, "Hold it!"

Tex, perceptions quickened by the surge of action, paid mental tribute to the Circle R foreman's split-second thinking. True, it was four guns against two. Their assailants could blast Peewee and himself to Kingdom Come in a burst of gunfire, but the odds were that at least two Circle R punchers

would keep them company and Sanders—the foremost—offered the best target.

For an instant, the tensed Texan could almost hear the rustle of the Grim Reaper's wings. Life or death balanced upon a razor edge. One itchy trigger finger, one shot and the dim interior of the Four Aces would have blazed into a bullet-ripped inferno.

Sanders inched forward, half crouched, the crunching of his boots upon the sandy floor loud in the tension-tight room.

"Let's string up the lousy nesters!" jerked out a puncher, peering cautiously from behind the doubtful shelter of an overturned card table.

"Button up!" rasped the foreman. "Hey, Peewee, keep out of this!"

"Whittling down the odds," thought Tex. Aloud, he said, low-voiced, "Vamoose, pard, this ain't your fight."

"Like hell it ain't!" came back the stubby nester. His six-gun swerved to Sanders' crouched form. "Loose your wolves, Silent!"

Again the batwings banged back before the impact of a fast moving form. A grizzled, dried-up man with greying hair, and a deputy sheriff's badge pinned to his loose-hanging vest, cycloned into the saloon. Behind him panted Mike, the barkeep, thick neck blooming dull-red from unwonted exertion.

From beneath shaggy eyebrows the deputy's faded blue eyes—twin chips of ice—circled in swift appraisal. Three quick strides and he stood between the two parties of embittered men.

"Hold your horses, boys!" he drawled coolly, jerking a sack of makin's from a pocket of his tobacco-crumbed vest. With slow deliberation he built a smoke, ignoring the black-muzzled menace of six guns.

Six slitted pairs of eyes watched him run a casual tongue along the edge of a brown paper wrapper. Plucking a match from his hatband, he flicked it with a thumb nail and touched it to the neat cylinder of tobacco, expelled the blue smoke with evident appreciation.

"Now boys," smiled Deputy Sheriff Jim Jeffries, his lips smiled, but his eyes were chilled, "Mebbe you'll enlighten me as to what the ruckus is all about."

A tweeded, bedraggled figure squirmed out from beneath a table, cigarette butts and sand clinging to his creased clothing. He made an ineffectual effort to rise, decided to remain upon hands and knees. "Officer, I saw it all! It was a clear case of premeditated assault with a lethal weapon, aggravated by a disgusting epithet." Chauncey Wythington-Smythe grasped a straight-back chair, levered his lank body erect and stood triumphant, swaying precariously.

Jeffries fixed him with a fishy eye, reached out negligently and pushed. The Dude's posterior hit the plank floor with a hollow thud. He gaped up at the sardonic deputy like a newly-landed fish.

"Stay put!" said Jeffries curtly, "You're drunk as a fiddler's clerk." His faded eyes flicked around, and his glance settled on the saloon owner.

"What did you lamp, Silva?"

The gambler rose from his table on the far side of the saloon. His carefully manicured hands spread and his slim shoulders rose in an eloquent gesture of negation, "Not a theeng, Jeem!"

The deputy grunted derisively, turned to Tex, still standing straight by the wall, "How come you went on the war-path, mister?"

"Bull and some more Circle R gents put the torch to my place at sunup. Bull called me a son and Swivel-Eye went for his gun. I winged Swivel-Eye and conked Bull. Maybe," he added thoughtfully, "I should have plugged him."

Jeffries nodded, "That tallies with Mike's yarn." He swung to Sanders, standing impassive behind him. "Get your boys out of town—pronto. Rock may rule the roost out on the range, but I rod Skull Creek."

The eyes of the two men met and grappled in a silent conflict of wills.

"Lamp them old lobos lock horns!" murmured Peewee, the

irrepressible. "My roll's on Jim Jeffries, he can outsting a stack of scorpions."

Surprisingly, Sanders' tight mouth twisted, and the ghost of a grin flitted across his bleak features, "Okay, Jim!"

He turned, picked his way through a litter of overturned chairs and upended tables to where Bull was writhing into returning consciousness. For a moment he stood eyeing the outstretched form, contempt written plain in his hard glance. "Pack him up to the sawbones!" he flung to the nearest puncher. Then he surveyed Swivel-Eye, still slumped on the chair. The numbness that follows the shock of a heavy slug was leaving the gunman's mashed shoulder now, and the sweat glistening in tiny beads upon his forehead told of racking pain.

"Slowing up, eh?" Derision edged the foreman's tones. "Wal, you never was fast enough—f'r me!"

The gunman's head was sunk upon his chest, but his swivel-eye, slanting up, gleamed maliciously. He groaned.

"Rattle yore hocks!" Sanders grabbed the wounded man's good shoulder, jerked him to his feet and hustled him roughly through the batwings.

Two punchers were carrying Bull's form up street, another steered Swivel-Eye in their wake. Sanders built a smoke and lounged against the hitchrail, while the deputy drifted along the plankwalk.

Inside the Four Aces tension slackened as quickly as the taut fibres of a severed rope. Peewee released a deep breath, "I swear I heard the creaking of the Golden Gates," he declared.

"Oh, feller, did you hear me sigh  
I surely figgered death was nigh,  
I saw a tear in every eye  
That one so pure as me should die."

"Bejabers," snorted Mike, briskly straightening upset chairs, "Why did they have to let you live?"

Cherokee's deep voice recalled Mike to the bar and the

Texan and Peewee dropped down at their former table. Juanita Silva had disappeared. The black-coated saloon owner resumed his incessant shuffling of the cards. The Dude was again draped across the bar, flooding Coyote Cal with a smooth stream of many-syllabled words. But smoke still clung, thick and sullen, to the discolored rafters of the low ceiling, grim reminder that Death had flicked two men with the tips of her sable wings—and passed by.

Cherokee crossed the room with long, unhurried stride, cradling a bottle of bourbon and three glasses. He set the bottle and glasses on the table before the two nesters, yanked up a chair. "Have a snort on me, boys," he invited, dusky features crinkling into a grim smile. "You sure earned it!" He poured—liberally.

"First time I ever saw Swivel-Eye shaded." His unwavering black eyes focused on the Texan, "You never got that speed nursing cows."

"Nope!" agreed Tex, noncommittally.

Cherokee raised his glass, "Wal, here's hell!" He swallowed his drink, poured another. "So Rock's crew smoked you nesters out?"

Tex nodded, sipping his drink.

"And you don't have a tail feather left?"

"Me, I never had no tail feather," threw in Peewee plaintively.

Cherokee gazed reflectively at the smoke-blackened ceiling. "If I sat your saddle and a gent give me a chance to build a roll that would choke an elephant, I reckon I'd latch onto it—fast."

There was veiled warning in the glance Peewee flashed across the table. Tex's reflective gaze shuttled between the two. What was back of the red-shirted cowman's remarks?

"Yessir," continued Cherokee, "If I was scratching bottom I'd jump at the chance."

"Whatsay," suggested Tex evenly, "you quit sunfishing and spread your hand?"

Cherokee's head dropped, his eyes, hard as black marbles, held the Texan's, "I can use your gun," he said baldly.

"For what?"

The cowman's smile was thin, "Herding stock—kinda!"

"I knew a jasper once," broke in Peewee, "who had plenty cows. For why? His steers had twins and the bulls triplets. He was flying high, wide and handsome, 'til he was invited, special, to a necktie social."

Menace lurked in the look Cherokee directed at him, but his deep voice was genial, "Quit dribbling, runt!"

"Guess I'll chew on it," cut in Tex, pondering on the by-play between Peewee and the 'breed.

Cherokee rose, "Kill the bottle, boys; I rod the Hobbled O, at the headwaters of the Skull. Be seeing you, Texan!"

"I wouldn't be surprised," returned Tex slowly, eying the smoke that coiled lazily from his cigarette.

Satisfaction gleamed in the cowman's dark eyes as he moved back to the bar, with the long, swinging stride of the Indian.

"I crave to hire gun-toting hands  
That rise before the lark,  
And you should see me blotching brands;  
For I work in the dark."

quoth Peewee.

Tex shot him a quick glance. "So the jasper's a rustler?" It was more a flat statement than a question.

"I wouldn't know, for sure," confessed Peewee, spilling more bourbon into his glass. "But I do know the country where Cherokee hangs out. There ain't grass enough to feed a brace of jack rabbits. So whyfore should he need riders—with fast guns?"

"So you figure he's milking Rock's herds?"

"Wal, he sure ain't a Cattlemen's Protective Association dick. Gosh!" The chunky nester groaned, "That Hyphen hombre is stalking us again. We should have cached the bottle."

The Dude rambled up, Stetson askew. "Gentlemen," he

beamed, taking a firm grip on the table edge, "I have just concluded an epoch-making deal. Our dear old pal Coyote has advanced me one hundred dollars upon the security of my watch, the last remaining memento of Chauncey Wythington-Smythe's former affluence. The fate of the ferocious hordes of rats that terrorize Mineral's citizens is sealed."

His glance dropped to the bottle of bourbon. Too late, Peewee divined his intention and made a quick grab for the bottle. The Dude got there first, grabbed it, held it high. "A toast to the cats," he cried, with joyous abandon. "May they wax fat on Mineral's rats." He grinned. "Not bad, eh?"

Again the squat nester groaned as the Dude swallowed avidly and the balance of the bourbon rapidly ebbed. With a wobbly bow, the dishevelled Englishman replaced the empty bottle on the table. "My appreciation for your hospitality, gentlemen," he declared, "is unbounded. This is indeed a thirsty land."

"That gent," declared Peewee irately, "should have been a camel." Gloomily, he watched their self-appointed guest teeter towards the gambler's table, where Coyote Cal had settled down, with Cherokee beside him, while Silva broke out a new deck of cards. "That'll tally three buzzards and one gordamned jackass," added the stocky nester, apropos of nothing.

"Figure the Limey'll hit for Ghost Gulch?" inquired Tex idly.

"Not unless he can pack a bar with him," said Peewee decidedly.

## CHAPTER 5

THAT night Tex and Peewee spread their slickers on the hay in the loft of the Livery Barn. At sunup, Tex awoke from long habit and dropped down the ladder. His new pard still snored lustily.

Grey light was filtering into the big horse barn below, where half a dozen ponies stomped in their stalls. Tex stripped off his shirt, washed and shaved at the water trough outside,

then led his pony out for a drink. This done, he spilled a measure of grain into the feed box and, while the buckskin munched, worked on its coat with currycomb and brush.

In the next stall a sleek palomino tossed its head and whinnied. With a rider's love of good horseflesh, the Texan turned and stood admiring the splendid animal. His gaze ran over its cleancut head, intelligent eyes and well-set ears. He noted the muscular shoulders, long barrel and straight, flat back. Time hung heavy on his hands, so he watered and grained it. Who in Skull Creek would own a horse like that, he wondered. As if in answer to his unspoken question, quick footsteps tip-tapped upon the rough planks of the barn floor. He turned to face Juanita Silva, now an even more perfect picture in neat riding habit, with divided skirt, smart stiff-brimmed Stetson and handtooled riding boots.

The girl jerked to a stop in surprise. "The man who is so queek with the gun!" she exclaimed delightedly. "You move so fast, like the rattlesnake—striking." She pointed the slim forefinger of a gloved hand at him, "Bang! Just like that! It was good—I do not like theese beeg Bull. You are—what you call eet—a gunshark. Yes?"

"No, ma'am," smiled Tex. "Where I was raised, on the Border, you got to be fast. My paw was cut down by a gunslick when I was star scholar of the Three Rivers School. Right then, I quit books. My teacher was Johnny Colt, and I was sure an apt pupil."

Oval face upraised, she listened with an abstracted smile, like a bored teacher hearing a tiresome juvenile recite his lesson. Her eyes were on the palomino, and the handle of her braided quirt made a faint, impatient tatto against a riding boot.

"You keel the gunsleek?" she inquired politely.

"You said it!" The Texan slid his Colt .45 out of the holster, held it on the flat of his extended hand and indicated the row of notches neatly gouged out of the smooth butt. "I'm packing his gun—a right nice shooting iron, too." He saw she was watching the palomino, "That yore horse, ma'am?"



Juanita nodded, quick interest in her eyes, "You like heem?"

"I've never seen finer—he's watered and fed."

"*Gracias!* You are so thoughtful!" She reached for a saddle set by the stall, a saddle of beautifully tooled leather, with silver-plated horn and ornamental silver corners on the skirts. Cost a heap of dinero, reflected Tex. "Let me handle it, ma'am", he interjected eagerly, stretching past her. The girl stood back, studying him curiously, while he saddled and bridled her mount.

He led out the horse and she swung up, as light as thistle-down.

"I love to ride in the early morning," she confided, balancing with ease as she curbed the impatiently dancing palomino.

"Me, too," agreed Tex. "It sure smells good, and there ain't no pesky flies around."

She gestured prettily, "Well, then, let us ride together!"

"You bet, ma'am!" Tex ducked into the buckskin's stall and hastily threw on its rig.

The two ponies churned dust along the silent main street, with its empty hitchrails and deserted plankwalks, and hit the stage road. For a mile north of town this paralleled Skull Creek, sluggishly flowing between steep banks, fringed with willow, above which occasionally towered a gaunt cottonwood. Grey flats, green-veined with chaparral and botched by the dull brown of squat greasewood, stretched to their right. The piping of quail from the brush mingled with the shrill scolding of a cactus wren. Awakening daylight groped across the sky with pale fingers, and the pungent scent of the greasewood was heavy on the still air.

From the clutter of adobes across creek came the querulous wailing of a child, the yapping of dogs, the frantic squealing of a hog behind being led to slaughter.

"Gordamned noisy people!" commented Tex, without thought.

The raven-haired girl beside him straightened, thin lips

tight. "Are they to be so despised?" Challenge lurked in her throaty tones.

The dismayed Tex could have bitten out his tongue with chagrin at the unthinking remark. "I guess not, ma'am," he replied lamely.

"Then why do you speak so scornfully? Do we not love—and hate—as you do? Do we not have pride? Is our blood tainted, that we earn the contempt of the haughty Yanqui?" Cheeks aflame, she spurred the palomino. Long legs working like pistons, great muscles flexing beneath its shining coat, it pounded ahead. Cursing his careless tongue, Tex kned the buckskin and was hard put to draw abreast. Stirrup to stirrup, they rode in brittle silence.

Far ahead along the stage road a horse and rider bulged into view, heading for town. The rider's form became more distinct as Tex and Juanita Silva, fast cantering, narrowed the distance between them. Suddenly, Tex's pulse speeded as he recognized the tired lope of Margery Lawson's old cow pony.

She was close now—a shabby, grey-shirted figure in patched denims, a battered Stetson crushed upon her coppery hair. An unwieldy bundle, covered by a torn blanket, sagged behind her cante. Salvage from the ruins of the burned spread, surmised Tex.

"What ees this?" exclaimed Juanita, her clear brow fretted with perplexity. "Surely not a woman saddle bum?"

"A nester gal, neighbor of mine," came back Tex shortly. "Howdy, Miss Margery!" he hailed, as the ancient pony plodded by along the dusty road.

Ignoring the queenly form on the palomino, Margery Lawson stared straight at and through him, then abruptly turned her head and looked fixedly ahead.

In a flash they passed the solitary, dust-powdered figure.

"Crow bait!" ejaculated Juanita.

Tex's hackles rose, but he locked his lips. He did not know—neither perhaps did the proud Juanita—that the envenomed epithet was an unconscious protest against a rude pioneer people who treated her race with tolerant scorn.

When they dismounted at the livery barn, Peewee was hunkered by the wide doorway, chewing a straw.

The girl tripped down street. Tex led the ponies inside. After a while he stepped out, dropped down beside his squat pard.

Peewee spat out the straw. "Hitch up with that gal," he commented, "and you won't need no gold mine."

"Give me a wildcat," grunted Tex. "It would be a mite more peaceable. You sticking around town?"

"Nope, not unless I eat my saddle blanket," said Peewee dolefully. "I'm hitting fr the Lazy S, over the rim. Maybe I'll find me a hole in the outfit. You crave to bite dust?"

Tex frowned at his cigarette. "Rock's not chasing me out of the valley!"

"That's what Lanky Lawson figured."

"Dammit!" exploded the Texan. "Rock can't get away with this. We got the law behind us."

"Not me," said Peewee comfortably. "I was just squatting."

"Wal, I filed on my one-sixty at the land office in Butte City."

"Maybe you should take a pasear out to the Circle R and tell Rock. I gamble the old moseyhorn would figure it was a real tear-squeezer."

"I never met up with a jasper who could spill so many useless words," growled the Texan, his voice laced with exasperation. He rose, "Let's mosey down to the grub shack. My tapeworm's hollering. I got dinero enough to stake us to a meal."

Hans Wurd's "Good Eats" was a narrow clapboard building squeezed between the Elite Barber Shop and the harness maker's. Old-timers claimed that the thrifty Hans had roofed over a public alleyway and some day some irascible citizen would kick out the back wall and walk right through—and be within his rights.

Tex pushed aside the dangling fly-curtains and stepped in, trailed by Peewee. A long, varnished counter, fronted by a

row of circular stools lay to his right while booths, separated by shoulder-high partitions, lined the opposite wall. In the rear lay the kitchen, where the corpulent Hans, stripped down to sleeveless vest and pants, sweated over a massive iron cook stove. His bulky form was partially visible through a square aperture cut in the division wall, with a shelf at its base upon which he set the laden plates.

The place was packed. Every seat was occupied but two located at the far end of the counter, adjoining the kitchen, where the heat was most oppressive.

"Lookee!" whispered Peewee hoarsely, as the two slid onto these seats, "The Lawson gal's turned cookie pusher!"

Tex's head swerved in quick surprise. As he jammed past diners, set shoulder to shoulder the length of the narrow counter, he hadn't given thought to the waitress. He saw a redheaded girl in neat white apron, sleeves rolled up beyond her firm brown forearms, busily serving the tight-packed array of punchers and townsmen, fending their verbal cracks with evident enjoyment.

"Ain't she a puncher's dream!" sighed Peewee. "Hey, Miss Margery," he yelled, "Can I have a brown gargle, two chicken in the shell and a stack of saddle blankets—on my good looks?"

Busy clearing off dirty dishes, she flung back, "Maybe on your gall, Peewee, but never on your good looks!" A chuckle ran along the counter, and a playful cowpoke took advantage of her distracted attention to grab her wrist. With her free hand, she picked up a heavy ladle and smartly cracked his knuckles. At his pained "Ouch!" the patrons roared.

"Next time," she promised, hefting a gleaming carving knife, "I'll use this!" There was smiling good humor in her blue eyes, but the grinning diners had a hunch she meant it.

Then she glimpsed the Texan on the end stool. Her features froze. She turned her back and became busy by the front window.

"Hey, Marge!" howled Peewee plaintively, "Gimme some service! I'm hungrier than a woodpecker with a headache."

With evident reluctance, she moved down the counter. "Stack of flapjacks, two fried eggs and coffee," she called to the sweating cook.

"And what's yours—Romeo?" she asked Tex, with cold disinterest.

"The same!" he said shortly.

The rush abated as the two riders rolled smokes and lingered over their coffee. Hans dabbed his broad forehead with a damp towel, rested two beefy arms upon the shelf and stuck his head through the aperture to inhale a few breaths of comparatively fresh air.

"You sure corralled a lapaloozer of a waitress," commented Peewee, jerking his head at Margery Lawson, who lingered at the far end of the counter.

The restaurant owner wagged his heavy head. "Yes, she iss good," he agreed gloomily.

"Then why you hanging crepe?"

"She iss too good. You see how they all like her and she scarcely put on the apron, already? Every time I hire a girl, she gets hitched and quits. Even if she iss not a good looker, these horse-thieves grab her. Lookit my last—the widder Markley—grey hair, stiff shoulder, store teeth, and her face!" Hans shivered at the recollection, "Ugly as galvanized sin! I say to myself—'Hans, your waitress trouble iss finished. The widder stick, for sure!' Then what? That damned old skin-flint Leechman out at Alkali Creek ups and marries her—claimed he had been eating fried beans and bacon for sixty years and craved a change in his old age. So you tell me," the portly Hans spread his beefy arms in despair, "how long that nice girl will dish out my chuck."

"You said it!" agreed Peewee soberly, "Speaking personal, I crave to slip a halter on the filly myself."

"Let's go!" cut in Tex brusquely. For no reason at all, he told himself, the conversation galled. What was it to him who married Margery Lawson, it was a sure thing he was out of the running. But he studiously stared straight ahead as he jingled down the restaurant.

Peewee was less reserved. He paused where Margery was wiping off the counter. "Miss Marg!" he requested in an urgent undertone, "Save me first place!"

"For what?" Her eyebrows lifted.

"When the fellers line up with wedding rings."

"You get out of here before I crown you with a cleaver!"

"It would be a pleasure, ma'am, for you," he assured her solemnly, and hastened after Tex.

Waddling bowlegged, beside the tall rider along the plank-walk, he burst into verse:

"I know a gal with golden hair  
And eyes of purest blue,  
She's beautiful beyond compare,  
A wife who would be true."

"Wal, why in heck don't you marry her?" snapped Tex, with rankling irritation.

"Me! Nobody ever loved me, 'cept my horse, and he slobbers all over me. Where we hitting for now?"

"The law shack. I'm going to brace Jim Jeffries."

## CHAPTER 6

DEPUTY SHERIFF JEFFRIES, despite his frosty exterior, was a fair-minded man. He had ridden for the big outfits in his younger days and knew just how the cowman felt about homesteaders. Nesters had to eat and, speaking generally, weren't particular about the brand when they butchered a steer. Killing one steer for meat was a short step to hazing off a dozen for market. Rock had been losing stock and Jeffries was surprised he'd laid off the nesters along Rattlesnake for so long. Not that there had been any complaints against them, mused the deputy, but Rock never did like to be crowded.

Nope, decided Jeffries, he didn't blame the Circle R one mite for cleaning nesters off its range. It was too bad about Lanky Lawson, but what could he expect—going on the prod? Peewee was just a tumbleweed. The Texan seemed an

upstanding young fellow, plenty fast on the draw. He should know better than file on another man's water.

From which it will be seen that Deputy Sheriff Jeffries was distinctly anti-nester, which was not surprising, since he'd once punched Circle R cows.

So when Tex and Peewee darkened the door of the law shack, there was no friendliness in the deputy's faded eyes.

"You rod the law?" inquired the Texan shortly. He was still smarting under Margery's rebuff.

"I aim to," barked Jeffries, "What's itching you?" He swung around from his battered desk and regarded his visitors with cold hostility.

"Nothing much," retorted Tex caustically. "I just had my spread burned by a bunch of Rock's waddies. They likewise smoked out Peewee and salivated Lanky Lawson. But maybe that don't interest the law, especially since we filed on them quarter-sections."

"And butchered Circle R beef," commented Jeffries dryly.

"That's a doggoned windy," came back the Texan flatly, but Peewee glanced longingly towards the door.

The deputy stuffed a battered corncob, scratched a match on the desk top. "Wal, you're lily-white, so what?"

"I want protection when I rebuild."

Jeffries drew calmly on his pipe, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes, for Peewee's uneasiness was plain. "You crave protection, too?" he inquired ironically.

"No sireel!" averred Peewee hastily. "Me, I got no rights. I just picked me a likely spot and set up a shack, never could raise the filing fee."

The deputy indicated two straightback chairs, lined against the side wall beneath yellowing reward notices, "Take the weight off your legs," he invited.

Tex sat stiff-backed, while Peewee perched beside him with a disarming grin.

Jeffries crossed his legs, slid down to a more comfortable position in his chair. "I know how you young roosters feel. Hell, I was a hot young tamale myself once." His leathery

cheeks crinkled. "What say you look at it Rock's way. He drove the first herd into this valley twenty years back. I swallowed dust in the drag. We fought Injuns, Mex and rustlers for our grass. They's a sizable boothill under the cottonwoods behind the Circle R—that's the price we paid! Wal, we got her tamed, and then mavericks like you, Texan, ride in and figure you can grab choice chunks of Circle R range without so much as 'by your leave.' Hell, feller, if it warn't for hombres like Rock there wouldn't be nothing in Apache Valley, outside of rattlers and 'Paches."

"Uncle Sam rods the range, not Rock Robertson," insisted Tex stubbornly.

"Circle R punchers flung lead to get it and they'll sure fling lead to hold it," retorted the deputy.

"And law don't mean a damn!"

"Not Washington law, wrote by a pack of politicians who don't know dung from wild honey," admitted the grizzled lawman calmly.

Tex rose impatiently, mouth bitter, "Heck, let's get out of here," he growled to his pard. "This jasper's backing Rock's hand, to the limit."

"Wal, Rock sure called your hand," came back the deputy, eyeing the angry young Texan with sardonic amusement.

When their footsteps died down the plankwalk outside, he knocked the dottle out of his pipe, thoughtfully ground it into the floor boards with a boot heel. Maybe Rock had been a mite too rough, he considered. There was no call to plug Lanky Lawson and leave that nice girl without a paw. But then she'd soon be hitched, and nesters were always as pesky as horse flies.

Hunkered beneath the canopy of The Four Aces, Tex watched Peewee jog out of town and considered his own future actions. It was plain he couldn't linger in Skull Creek, not with his slim roll. There was no sense in rebuilding his cabin and barn for Rock to burn down again. If he hunted a job punching cows it was doubtful if any spread in Apache



Valley would hire him. The fracas in the saloon, his crippling of Swivel-Eye and pistol-whipping of Rock Robertson's son, would have set every cowman against him. True, there were plenty more cow towns in the West and plenty more spreads, but he had a stubborn streak. He hated to be pushed out of Apache Valley.

Thought of Cherokee's offer drifted into his mind. He had felt an instinctive antagonism towards the dusky cowman. But chances were he could fatten his roll by trailing with the 'breed, and he had a hunch it would give him a chance to strike back at the Circle R. Bounded by the trackless Barrens on the west and rugged hill country in the north, Rock's range was wide open. That was why he took no chances, why he savagely hazed off nesters who settled near his line. Maybe Cherokee had been pecking.

With furrowed brow, Tex crushed his cigarette butt and built another smoke. He'd never swung a wide loop and didn't crave to start. Yet, he argued with himself, if Rock Robertson could break the law by burning homesteaders' shacks and herding them off land the U.S. Government said was theirs, why shouldn't he—Tex Taylor—have the right to break it by hazing off Circle R cows? Rock's crew had burnt him out and broke him. This was his chance to kick back. He didn't have much choice—it was either tie up with Cherokee or leave the country.

But all his instincts were against it. Deep down he knew he couldn't hit the hoot owl trail. What then?

Thudding hooves broke in upon his cogitations. A big jack plodded past, the wizened figure of Coyote Cal in the saddle. On a lead rope, another burro trailed the prospector, its kiacks bulging with supplies, covered by a tarp and neatly secured with a diamond hitch.

Tex's speculative glance followed the burros until rising dust veiled them. His thoughts angled off on a new trail. That old horned toad was lousy with dinero. He didn't have to ponder whether he would tighten his belt a notch, or sell his saddle to raise the price of a meal. He had dollars to spill,

with a rich gold mine to tap at his pleasure. Curious no one had located his claim. He sure wasn't closemouthed about it. Ghost Gulch, Peewee had said, jumpacked with abandoned workings. How come Coyote hit it rich where other men failed? And how did he hide his Eldorado? It was a sure thing that plenty of dinero-hungry hombres had kept cases on him. Seemed like he wasn't named Coyote for nothing. Chances were his fabulous mine was nowhere near Ghost Gulch—he just shacked there as a blind.

The musing Texan tautened as a vagrant thought hit him with the impact of a .45 slug. Here was a way out of his tight. Why not take a fling at locating the mine and match his wits against Coyote's? He had nothing to lose and a fortune to gain. Should Lady Luck smile—his pulse speeded—he wouldn't need to hitch up with any night-riding 'breed. He could rebuild his cabin and barn, add a bunkhouse, hire a crew and fight Rock Robertson with the cowman's own weapons—gold, guns and guts.

## CHAPTER 7

CLOAKING a mounting excitement, Tex straightened, pushed through the batwings into the saloon. There were few patrons at that early hour. Silva, the immaculate gambler, laid out endless hands of solitaire at his side table, and two cowpokes yawned over their bottled beer. Hyphen, the dude, slumped across a table, dead asleep or dead drunk. Behind the bar, Mike polished dusty glasses.

Tex ordered a drink and poured a scant two fingers. "Mike," he said, "What do you know about Ghost Gulch?"

"So you got the fever!" The barkeep's eyes twinkled as he set a glass on the shelf behind him and cradled his arms on the mahogany.

"What do you mean—fever?"

Mike chuckled. "A score of likely young fellers have asked me the same question and oi've watched thim head into the

Barrens with high hopes. But, begorra, niver a wan ever saw sight of color."

"Mebbe they didn't poke around in the right spot."

"Where would they poke around?" demanded Mike, amusement plain upon his ruddy features, "but in Ghost Gulch, where that ould devil Coyote Cal digs his gunny sacks av gold?"

"If that mine is in Ghost Gulch, I'll stake my saddle against your bar towel that I locate it," averred Tex, sipping his drink.

"That's what all the young scalpeens say! But they ride back, dragging their tails, swearing that Cal is the father of all coyotes." Mike sobered. "I like you, Texan. You're spunky and Rock gave yez the back of his hand. Will you take an ould man's advice and forget Ghost Gulch? There's less money nursing cows, but it's sure money. Ye'll squander time and the savages will mebbe lift your scalp if you gopher around in the Barrens."

"My bet still stands!"

The barkeep shrugged. "Yez can kape your saddle, my bhoys." He flipped the bar towel across his shoulder, fumbled beneath the bar and produced a pad of paper and stub of pencil. "'Tis aisy to locate the Gulch," he continued, wetting the pencil tip with his tongue. Tex watched closely while he laboriously drew a rough map on the pad. "See here!" he said, "Yez cross Skull Creek and ride forty miles to the west, as the crow flies, heading towards the Black Kaweahs, bad cess to thim for a 'Pache hideout. Watch for two buttes, red they are, and men say they stand like sintinals on the plain. The land beyond is crazy with canyons and hot as the hearthstones of hell. Ghost Gulch is in its midst, maybe six miles from the buttes."

"On a straight line west?"

"Indade—and Coyote makes no secret of it."

"Thanks, pard," said Tex. "When I mine that million I'll buy you a saloon, spittoons and all."

"Indade and I'll be happy to take it," chuckled the genial

barkeep, "but I'll look for it in the next world, begorra, for I'll niver get it in this."

Tex eyed the map, "Maybe I'll fool you." He set down his empty glass.

"And kape your eyes skinned for the murdering red savages," warned Mike, "or you'll niver need another hair cut."

Outside the saloon, Tex paused and totted up his dwindling dollars. Then he hurried across Main Street and ran up the wooden steps of the Trading Post. He emerged with a gunny sack slung across his back, heavy with flour, a bag of beans, a chunk of bacon, fresh-ground coffee, shiny new cooking utensils—and his hip pocket empty save for a solitary brass beer check.

He pushed through the batwings of The Four Aces again, pitched the metal disc on the bar, "Gimme a beer, Mike," he grinned, "and wish me luck. Now I'm cleaned out complete."

At the feed barn, he threw his rig on the buckskin, tied the gunny sack behind the cantle—and remembered his livery bill. He heard Yeager's deep voice outside and led the buckskin through the wide doorway. Chauncey Wythington-Smythe, tweeds wrinkled and liquor-spotted, was inspecting a decrepit old wagon that had been abandoned on the lot beside the barn, with a perplexed air. Two skinny mules were tied to a fence in the rear. Lantern-jawed Bill Yeager teetered on his heels behind the pilgrim. The expression upon his bland features reminded Tex of a sharp-eyed old fox contemplating a particularly plump hen.

"Jumping grasshoppers!" murmured the Texan, recollecting the Englishman's fool project to gather cats in Ghost Gulch and haul them to Mineral, "if that tenderfoot figures them two slabs of buzzard bait will haul that bunch of junk more than two whoops and a holler, he's loco."

The Dude turned and beamed upon him with manifest relief. "Hello! Would it be possible for you to give me some advice? I am in quite a dilemma."

Yeager caught the Texan's amused glance, quickly dropped

an eyelid. His right hand dove into a pants pocket and he stealthily displayed a gold eagle. The implication was plain.

Tex sauntered over.

"Our mutual friend," explained the Dude, "assures me that this wagon may be purchased at a bargain price."

"Genuine Conestoga," threw in the liveryman, "Better were never made, they just roll on forever."

"But it appears to be in a somewhat dilapidated condition, old bean."

"Wal," agreed Yeager, straight-faced, "the canvas may be a little torn, but who gives a damn now the rainy season's over? As for the body, a spot of paint and it's as good as new. It's just like that team of fine Missouri mules—seasoned. You can have the team and wagon for a hundred. And," he continued, with a burst of generosity, "I'll throw in a set of harness to boot. I know I'm crazy," he added modestly, "but I never was one to haggle. Ain't that a bargain, if there ever was one, Texan?"

But Tex was staring at the mules. "Are them critters propped up, or do they just hang on their tie ropes?" he inquired.

"Now this ain't no time for hurrahin'," interjected the liveryman severely, "Make it a hundred, Limey, and we'll call it a deal."

Tex rasped his chin, "Yep," he agreed, "I reckon the outfit is well worth a hundred."

"Many thanks, old fellow!" enthused the Dude, "I was a little dubious. After all, a hundred dollars—"

"Dollars!" ejaculated Tex, with wide-eyed amazement, "I thought you was talking cents! And you kick me again, Yeager," he swung to face the chagrined liveryman, "I'll just naturally push that big nose of yours right out of the back of your conk."

"Make it seventy-five dollars," interposed Yeager hastily, "I got to get down town."

The Dude eyed Tex with comic bewilderment.

"Charge him ten dollars for moving the junk off his lot," suggested the latter.

"Fifty dollars!" wailed Yeager. "Dammit, them mules cost me more'n that for feed."

The Dude drew a deep breath. "Forty dollars, old man, and I insist that our Texas friend select the harness."

"Afore long you'll want me to throw in my pants," groaned the liveryman, "Forty-five dollars and not a cent less, so help me!"

"Forty!" repeated the Dude firmly.

"I just recollected," put in Tex, amusement glimmering in his eyes, "A nester pard of mine got a dandy team and—"

"It's a deal at forty dollars!" snapped Yeager. He eyed Tex acridly. "In Arizona we don't welcome gents like you, who stick their beaks into other folks' business."

"In Texas," grinned Tex, "we just naturally string up gents like you—we call 'em horse-thieves!"

Shoulders shaking with amusement, he followed the indignant Yeager back into the barn, to select the harness.

He paused at a tug upon his sleeve, turned. The Dude thrust a double eagle into his palm.

"Say, what's the idea?" he demanded.

"Shall we say a token of appreciation," beamed Wythington-Smythe. "You saved me at least fifty dollars."

The coin spun through the air as Tex tossed it back. "Keep it, Limey, you'll need it before you get through hauling Coyote's cats."

"But I insist!" The Dude endeavored to drop the coin into a pocket of the rider's dangling vest. Tex good-humoredly fended him off. "If you want," he drawled, "you can square my feed bill."

Where the stage road started to angle eastward, Tex crossed the creek and headed towards the Black Kaweahs, the buckskin plodding over a sea of grama that flowed smoothly into the blue haze of distance. This was Circle R range and he was alert for telltale dust streamers stirred up by questing

punchers. But nothing marred the monotony of the plain save speckled Circle R cows.

Before noon he had left the flats behind and moved through rolling foothills, smooth-topped and sun-scorched, seamed with cowpaths. When the sun was high, he checked his pony in a draw, thick with scrub oak, and spongy from the runoff of a small spring, seeping from between moss-covered boulders. It was a relief to walk around and work off saddlesore muscles. A fellow sure softened up fast, he considered. Another week around town and he'd be so puny he couldn't pull off his hat.

He loosened cinches and rocked the saddle, slipped off the buckskin's headstall and allowed it to browse on the rank grass while he nibbled on some dry biscuit.

Afternoon found him in the saddle, beating westward, ever westward. The grass country lay behind him now. Around lay the dips and rises of the rimrock country, scarred with sun-dered rock and greyed with alkali dust. Stunted mesquite struggled for life and an occasional gnarled old juniper twisted stubbornly from a crevice.

Far ahead, the Keweahs smouldered through shimmering waves of heated air. Above, an eagle was pin-pointed against the blue, floating upon motionless pinions.

Shadows slithered across the arid expanse as the sun slanted towards the horizon. Still the tireless cow pony jogged on. Alkali dust rose in a thin haze, through which horse and rider seemed wraithlike, a haze whose myriad motes glittered in the sunlight and sifted into eyes and ears, stinging like fire. Spiked yucca and needle-pointed tufts of Spanish bayonet were clumped among the rocks now, and the thousand-spined cholla clustered thick.

The terrain flattened and the lonely rider rode out upon a vast, bouldery plain where smooth stretches of cracked alkali gleamed white and skeleton ocatillos extended scrawny arms in grisly welcome. Thorny thickets of prickly pear made impenetrable barriers and there was no life save the silent diamondbacks, gliding between the rocks.

Squinting into the sinking sun, Tex searched for sight of the twin buttes. Red they were, Mike had said, standing like sentinels on the plain. Then, as the sun's afterglow bathed the Kaweahs blood-red, the weary rider, peering through eyes inflamed by the ever-rising dust, sighted two square buttes, buttressed against the horizon. Beyond them, from the shimmering hills, the thin smoke columns of Apache signal fires quavered up towards the darkening sky.

## CHAPTER 8

THAT NIGHT the Texan made dry camp in the Barrens. He spilled precious water from his canteen into the crown of his Stetson and held it beneath the buckskin's eager muzzle, stripped the gear off the pony and picketed it with a long rope. Then, after much searching, he gathered a scant pile of dead brush, kindled a small fire between two rocks and set his new coffeepot upon it. Night settled on the solitudes as he sliced bacon into the skillet and set it to sizzle over the crackling mesquite. He munched a dry biscuit and watched the bright, dancing flames . . . dawn brought a chilly breeze from the mountains that rustled the dead stalks of an ocatillo and moaned softly through the greasewood. Cramped and cold, the Texan rose stiffly and rolled up his slicker.

Thought of marauding Apaches on his mind, he searched the arid terrain, bleak and forbidding, half concealed by lingering night. His muscles were cramped when he hefted the heavy stock saddle and his eyes were sore from the blinding dust. He felt, Tex reflected with sour humor, like the frazzled end of a misspent night.

He was in the saddle, heading for the distant buttes, when the sun came up and the coolness fled as before the fiery breath of a furnace. Mile after mile the nodding pony plodded across the lusterless face of the burning plain. Steadily the two buttes, gleaming dull-red, bulked larger and larger against the shadowed mountains beyond.

Before noon, he reined up between them, the buckskin



standing hockdeep in the dust of centuries that had sifted down from the crumbling escarpments towering high above. Tex scanned the terrain that lay ahead—a great basin of tortured rock and twisted canyon, spewed up by some past cataclysm, out of which thrust isolated mesas and ragged buttes. The whole was riven by a maze of canyon and gulch, and beyond it the sullen bulk of the Black Kaweahs, slashed by gorges, rose from bench to pinnacle, pinnacle to peak, etched dark against the molten blue of the heavens.

What chance to locate Ghost Gulch in that tangled wilderness, thought the Texan wryly. He had a better chance of finding a bee in a blizzard. Then he remembered Coyote and his burros. They must have left tracks, and chances were the prospector headed for the twin buttes that stuck up like two sore thumbs.

He wheeled the buckskin, skirting the southerly butte, plowed through heaped talus, searching for sign. He found it, plain in the thick dust, a trail that led down into the chaos beyond, smouldering yellow and red and black in the merciless sun glare.

For a while, he studied the sign from the saddle—the sharply defined small tracks of two burros and, partially obliterating them, the hoof marks of a pony. Why, he puzzled, were the burros walking and the pony trotting? Seemed like another rider had trailed Coyote into Ghost Gulch.

He heeled the buckskin and followed the trail, winding through silent canyons, crossing the bouldery beds protruding from the earth's maw like misshapen teeth—pushing deeper and deeper into the chaos of canyons.

The trail abruptly angled between the black portals of a gulch, smooth-polished by winter storm. He rode down a gloomy corridor, the blue sky ribboned high overhead. Then the walls dropped away, and the rider drew rein with quick-drawn breath—Ghost Gulch!

Before him the gulch widened to perhaps a quarter of a mile, overshadowed by beetling cliffs. At the further end, chaparral made a verdant patch of green against the grey

granite. Beyond the chaparral, the cliffs were riven and broken. A huge stamp mill reared its head in the center of the gulch, flanked by pyramids of tailings. Nearby were scattered a long bunkhouse, a neat row of shacks, other frame buildings. Beside the rocky trail, a faded wooden sign sagged upon drooping supports. Tex traced the words, "Keweah Mining Company," upon the peeling paint.

A job for a giant, considered Tex, building that town in the burning depths of the Barrens; freighting machinery across miles of desert, hauling lumber from distant sawmills, packing in supplies through summer heat and winter blizzard. All to be abandoned to dissolution and decay; for as he rode closer, he saw that the buildings were greyed and tottering. Holes gaped in their crumbling walls and yawned in their sagging roofs. There was no sign of human life in this silent gulch, buried in the loneliness of the Barrens. It was peopled only by the ghosts of past memories, ghosts—and cats.

Hyphen, thought the Texan, glance darting around, wouldn't be disappointed if ever he sought his promised land of rat-killers. Lean, wild-eyed felines swarmed among the buildings. At his approach they scurried through doorways, leapt out of windows, streaked for the scrubby brush, in wild panic. Yellow eyes gleamed from the darkness of the deserted cabins like growing coals.

But where was Coyote Cal?

In vain, Tex scanned the gulch for signs of human habitation. Alert for trace of lurking Apaches, he circled the rotting shacks; followed rusted rails to the black mouths of tunnels sunk deep into the cliff walls, some blocked by overturned ore cars; examined the vicinity of the spring and beat through the chaparral around it. When he finally drifted back, baffled, to the shade of the spectral stamp mill, he could have sworn that no one had moved a shovelful of ore in Ghost Gulch for years. There was no freshly turned earth, no new tailings. To all appearances, not a pick had been swung since the defunct Keweah Mining Company quit operations in the distant past.

Yet Coyote spent gold, minted gold, with a lavish hand. Chances were, considered the rider, dropping his reins and making a smoke, his first hunch hit the bull's-eye—the wily prospector's mine was somewhere outside the Gulch and he made his headquarters in one of the cabins. Maybe he was out at the mine. Memory of the Apache signal smoke, coiling thinly from the hills, came back. Had one of those renegade bands that constantly broke out of the reservation down in the Chiracahua country wiped out Coyote? Someone had dogged the prospector, too. Maybe he was lying around, an Apache arrow through his chest. Again, the Texan's uneasy glance circled, but nothing disturbed the serenity of the sleeping gulch . . . a hoarse scream ripped through the brooding silence. The buckskin, standing droop-hipped, galvanized into startled life, jumped as though its belly was full of bed springs, almost unseating its equally startled rider. Tex grabbed leather, secured the reins and fought the panicky pony. Finally he subdued it. Taut in the saddle, his head swerved as his eyes probed the sleeping gulch, searching for Apaches.

Again the bloodcurdling scream, pulsating with mortal agony and quivering away to a gasping moan.

Brow furrowed with perplexity, Tex held the trembling buckskin in a tight rein. It was either Apache torturing a prisoner or—his back hairs prickled—a ghost.

For a third time, a shriek startled the echoes, to abruptly terminate in a muffled choking, as though the victim had been gagged.

Still searching for the source of the sound, the puzzled rider circled the stamp mill, scanning the ruins around, but nothing moved, save the slinking cats.

Then, beyond the mine buildings, midway towards the chaparral at the lower end of the gulch, his eyes found a frame bungalow, set apart amid straggling scrub oak and enclosed by a pole fence. A small horse barn, roofless, stood behind it. It was one building he had not examined.

Cautiously, fearing a trap, he headed his pony in its direc-

tion. As he pulled closer, he saw that the building was in a little better state than the other crumbling structures, and, strangely, there was a neat, fresh-dug garden patch beside it. Its windows, from the frames of which jagged fragments of glass still protruded, stared like the dead eyes of a corpse.

He rode through a gap in the fence, dismounted in front of a porch with sagging pillars, and mounted rickety wooden steps. Picking his way across the rotting porch floor, he stood in the open doorway—and recoiled in horror. From the light that filtered through the glassless windows, his eyes, still dazed by the sun glare outside, focussed a brass bedstead. Spread-eagled upon the filthy mattress was a ghastly figure. It was Coyote Cal, naked except for dark pants slack around his middle. A red bandana was wrapt around mouth and nose, above which his eyes, distorted with pain and terror, glared feverishly. His feet were bare, each firmly secured to a bed-post by a rawhide thong wound around the ankle. Other thongs cut deep into the flesh of his wrists, lashing them to the posts at the head of the bed. Blood dripped from his toes and blood matted the thick hair of his chest. Flies buzzed black around him.

Thumbing back the hammer of his gun, Tex slid around the door jamb, braced for the onslaught of lurking Apaches. A chair stood beside the bed. The prospector's shirt bunched upon it, and a gunbelt was looped over the back. His high boots and socks had been dropped beside it.

Beneath the window the floorboards were littered with oddments of saddlery, boxes of shells, articles of clothing, all scattered around a small brass-bound trunk whose lid had been flung back, as though they had been pawed out of the trunk in frenzied search.

But there was no sign of the prospector's assailants.

Two doorways were cut in the rear wall. Tensed, expecting a flood of yelling Apaches to erupt upon him at any moment, Tex cat-toed towards the nearer door. It opened on to a kitchen, with iron cook stove and shelves heavy with airtights. A plank table in its center carried a blackened stable lantern,

a half-empty whisky bottle and a greasy deck of cards. Water was piped to a sink, beside which hung a discolored towel. But there was no sign of an intruder.

Satisfied the room was empty, the Texan slid towards the other doorway. Long disused, a bedroom lay behind it, bed and washstand thick with dust. A cracked mirror, with tarnished gilt frame, still hung from the wall. Then the harsh squeak of a rusted hinge reached his ears. He remembered the horse barn in the rear and leapt for the window. The rotten flooring caved beneath his weight. He tripped, sprawled headlong. The gun roared as it flew from his fist. He hit the floor with a thud that jarred every joint, frantically kicked free of the splintered flooring. On his feet again, he dashed to the window. The thud of racing hooves, rapidly dying with distance, was plain in his ears. A solitary rider, forking a shod horse, he registered, and flung one leg over the sill. As he was about to drop down, he remembered his gun.

By the time he had crawled around the creaking floor and finally recovered the weapon from beneath the bed, he knew that Coyote's devilish attacker had gained too great a lead for effective pursuit.

At thought of the tortured prospector, the Texan hurried back to the outer room. Coyote lay inert, eyes closed. Tex thought that he was dead until he felt the faint beating of his pulse. He severed the rawhide thongs that cut so deeply into the miner's flesh and slipped the bandana off his mouth.

Filling a bucket with water in the kitchen, he soaked the grimy towel and wiped off Coyote's pain-racked features. A deep growl of anger escaped him as he eyed the prospector's lacerated chest. Blood still seeped sluggishly from half a dozen knife stabs, deep, but not quite deep enough to kill. His stomach sickened at the sight of the victim's feet, the bloody smears where his toenails had been. The fiend who had dogged the prospector into the gulch was worse than an Apache.

The stench that hung on the heated air was overpowering. When he had roughly bandaged the slack form with more

towels he found near the rifled trunk, Tex retreated to the porch and gratefully inhaled lungfuls of pure air.

When he returned to the room, Coyote's eyes blinked open. Tex brought the half-empty bottle of bourbon from the kitchen, gathered a musty pillow from the next room and gently eased the prospector to a sitting position. Coyote grabbed the bottle eagerly, but when Tex relinquished it, the prospector's arms sank beneath its weight. Weak as a kitten, considered the rider, boosting the bottle up to Coyote's lips.

"Thanks, pard!" he breathed huskily, and drank deeply. "That rattlesnake most carved me up," he volunteered, as Tex laid him back against the pillow.

"Acquainted with the gent?" asked the rider offhand, ears eager for the reply.

The prospector nodded, and there was something wolflike about his narrow, furrowed features as he bared yellowed teeth in a mirthless grin, "Yep, I know him."

"Who was it?"

"I ain't spilling nothing. When I get around, I aim to—even things up."

"He was after your mine, I guess?"

"Sure!" Coyote's face twisted with pain. "But no gordamned 'Pache can make me talk."

"You got spunk aplenty, old-timer," Tex assured him feelingly, and wondered if he would have displayed the same fortitude. He spread a blanket over the prospector's body to keep off the pesky flies. "Now you get some rest, I'll be around."

"Gimme my iron!" croaked Coyote. His voice was feebler now.

Tex lifted the gunbelt off the back of the chair, and slid the six-gun out of its worn holster. He noted it was a single-action, long barrelled "Peacemaker," triggerless and with filed sights—a gunman's gun. The prospector was no novice with a shooting iron.

Checking the loads, he set the weapon upon the mattress close to Coyote's right hand. The prospector was too weak to lift, much less to aim it, he thought, but it did no harm to

humor the old man. Maybe it would put his mind at rest. After the hell he'd been through it was a miracle he was still sane.

Coyote's eyelids dropped again. Tex sauntered outside and hunkered upon the porch. Sucking a smoke, he pondered his future actions as he watched the shadow of the cliff creep across the gulch. He had to get Coyote to a doctor. Could the wounded man stand the long tiresome trip back to Skull Creek? He had lost plenty blood. Even if he could sit a saddle, the jolting of the trail would probably open up those ugly knife wounds on his chest.

Yet it was a sure thing he was too weak to be left alone. If he—Tex—headed back to town for help, chances were that Coyote would be dead before he could return. Finally, the rider quit pondering, maybe the old man would be dead before sunup—and solve the problem.

The feathered haft of an arrow caught his eye, its tip buried in the siding beside a window. Another was transfixed in the door frame above his head. Tex built another smoke and tried to ignore the implications of their presence—he had plenty to worry him, besides marauding Apaches.

Then he fell to considering the assailant who had trailed the prospector to his hideaway. Odds were it was a Mex, he reflected. The knife work pointed that way. Coyote knew, but the knifer's failure to pry the secret of the mine out of him furnished grim proof that the tough old lobo could be as stubborn as a mule if he didn't want to talk.

Faint purple, slowly deepening, began to veil the gulch. The harsh outlines of stamp mill and shacks were softened; high on the eastern ramparts a long, undulating ribbon of sunlight shrank to a thread and faded away; from the chaparral, the raucous braying of a burro ascended into the still air.

Tex was reminded of his pony, still tethered beneath the oaks. He stripped off its gear, watered and hobbled it, then spread his slicker beneath a tree. He wouldn't have slept in that stinking house of torture for all the gold in Coyote's mine.

Before the rising sun gilded the cliff top, Tex mounted the porch steps to look at his patient. Coyote, lined features more shrunken than ever, tossed and moaned in his sleep. The floor boards complained as Tex crossed the floor. The prospector jerked into wakefulness, his gaunt hand gripped the gun, struggled to raise it.

"Easy, old-timer!" sang out the visitor. "Everything's hunky-dory." The prospector gestured feebly. Tex came to the bedside.

The injured man was panting for breath, jaw sagging. Tex had to bend low to catch his gasping whisper, "Stick around!"

"You bet!" Tex assured him, "I guess your tapeworm could handle some chuck."

"No chuck!" whispered the other. "Gimme a shot of bourbon. I don't feel so good."

"You're doing fine!" Even as he mouthed the cheery reassurance, Tex knew that the old man was slipping—fast. The ordeal of the day before had proven too much even for his toughened frame. And the shredded towels he had wrapped around Coyote's chest had soaked brown in the night with blood from still open wounds.

He made a fire in the stove and set the coffeepot to boil. After a while, he took a mug of coffee, laced with whisky, to the bedside.

Gently raising the relaxed body, he held the mug to the prospector's lips. Coyote swallowed avidly, choked—red foam bubbled upon his lips.

Tex set the mug on one side, supported Coyote's sagging form with a bent arm. He had seen men die before and it was never pleasant.

"Listen!" He spoke loudly into the old-timer's ear, "You're bucking out, pard. Who knifed you? Gimme the skunk's name—I'll go git him."

Coyote's eyelids had dropped, he lay heavy, as though death was already upon him, against the Texan's crooked arm. At the rider's words, Tex felt the slack frame stir restlessly, he held his head low to catch a halting murmur. But it



was plain the dying man's mind was wandering, he had not understood the sharp-spoken question. The listener could only catch snatches of the mumbled talk—"You're—real pard—scared off that lousy 'Pache—he wanted—gold—it's yours, all yours for saving—saving—" The murmur died. Coyote's jaw dropped, his head rolled back. Blood welled sluggishly from his slack lips and spread over his chin.

Gently, Tex laid the body on the bed and pulled the blanket up over the grizzled features. Coyote Cal had slipped into the Great Beyond, and taken two secrets with him—the identity of the man who killed him and the location of his mine.

## CHAPTER 9

BEHIND the house, Tex found a pick and shovel, together with a rake. Pick in hand, he looked around, considering a last resting place for the remains of Coyote Cal.

His gaze fell upon the patch of cultivated ground beside the porch. Curious, he mused, that the prospector had taken the trouble to turn that ground over, keep it free from weeds and rake it smooth. He hadn't planted much, beyond a neat border of scarlet cacti.

What better place for his grave? Easy digging, too!

The earth was loose, and the Texan shovelled with little effort. Not a foot down, the point of his spade struck a solid object. A wild, exhilarating thought struck the digger. Sweated shirt sticking to his back and perspiration channeling down his face, he dug frantically, flinging the sandy earth wildly aside. Gradually the curved top of a trunk, mate to the one inside the house, came into view.

Tex was digging like a madman now. Dirt flew as he cleared it from around the trunk, until the entire top stood revealed, brassbound and sturdy.

Face shining with sweat, and trembling with excitement, he inserted the edge of the spade under the lid, pried—in vain. He dropped the spade and grabbed the pick, battered the lock with swinging blows. The sharp point of the pick sank in. He

levered the lid loose. Breathless, he flung it back. His pulse hammered as he eyed rows of bulging leather pouches tightly packed inside. Almost fearfully, he stooped and hefted one of the pouches. It was weighty and coin clinked faintly as he fingered it. With hands that shook as with fever, a raging fever that the yellow metal has ever stirred in men, he fumbled at the thong wound tight around its neck. But the tightly knotted rawhide defied his eager fingers. He whipped out his Barlow knife, set the blade to the rawhide. The severed thong fell away. He tilted the pouch—a glittering stream of twenty-dollar gold pieces—almost as large as silver dollars—spilled into his hand.

Scarce able to grasp the extent of his good fortune, he stared wide-eyed at the glittering gold in his hand, then at the closely packed pouches, piled in the trunk almost to the lid. Here was the gold he sought, ready-minted—tens of thousands of dollars, and it was his—all his! Coyote Cal had left it to him. The old prospector had been hauling his ore to a stamp mill—in Mineral, chances were—and hoarded the proceeds. What need to hunt for his mine now?

Brain awlirl at the richness of his find, Tex eyed the buckskin, nosing the scanty herbage beneath the oaks. This was a heavy load for his saddle horse. He'd need a burro.

He dropped the loose gold that weighted his palm into a pants pocket, twisted the neck of the sack leather pouch and retied the thong around it. Gathering three more pouches, he hugged them against his chest and moved towards the pony. He saddled and bridled the animal. With fingers that still trembled, he unstrapped his saddlebags, stored two pouches in each.

Then he slammed down the lid of the dead man's trunk, covered it with earth again, carefully smoothed over the patch of ground with the rake. He'd cover his find until he had buried Coyote. Lady Luck was capricious, her smile might change to a frown. A stranger might ride into the gulch before he had laid his benefactor away. With such wealth as he

had never dreamed of, ready to be hauled away, he would be loco to take even a long chance of losing it.

Wet with perspiration, he eyed the job with satisfaction—Coyote's gold—his gold—was securely hidden again, safe until he rounded up a burro and removed it.

So engrossed had he been with the gold that all thought of roaming Apaches had faded from his mind. A shrill whinny from the buckskin broke in upon his daydreams. Head high, the pony was regarding something up gulch. Tex twirled around, sensed movement in the chaparral near the spring. As he eyed the brush uncertainly, an Apache rode into full view, riding a scrawny pony, bareback. He was naked save for dirty-white loin cloth and cartridge belt sagging over his hip. A red flannel band circled his head and rank black hair straggled from beneath it. He gripped a gun in his left hand. For a moment he sat statuelike, the sunlight glistening upon his coppery torso. Then he sighted either the saddle pony or its rider. A shrill yell tore from his throat. The stringy bay beneath him sprang forward.

Green branches were thrust aside as other naked riders crashed through the screening chaparral. The slumbering calm of Ghost Gulch was ripped into raw shreds as they hurtled down the gulch, shrieking and waving guns and stocky bows.

At a run, Tex hit for his pony. A flying leap and he was astride and gathering up the trailing reins. Bent low, he drove the steel home, heading for the mouth of the gulch. There was no time to circle through the gap in the fence, with the bunch of yelling Apaches fast approaching over the sun-baked ground.

The buckskin took the fence in its stride, with inches to spare, but the branch of a straggling scrub oak snagged the Texan's Stetson and swept it off.

Legs flailing and neck outstretched, the pony streaked past shacks and heaped tailings. With the hoarse shrieks of the savages and the drumming of unshod hooves beating into his

ears, the Texan rode slack-reined, leaning forward and urging the racing buckskin with voice and spur.

The towering portals loomed close. As his pony shot into the gloomy passageway, the Texan's head twisted for a quick glance at his pursuers. The nearest not a hundred paces behind, they were strung out like a ravaging wolf pack.

In seconds he was through the rock-bound corridor. As he emerged into bright sunlight again, he yanked the hard-breathing buckskin back upon its haunches, slid his Winchester out of the boot and swung to the ground.

Pivoting, he faced the narrow passage he had just traversed. Its dim depths were clouded by floating dust. Scarcely had he levered a shell into the breach when a confused medley of sound echoed and re-echoed against the high-flung walls. Through the dust fog he glimpsed a racing pony and the painted visage of its rider. Levelling upon the pony's broad chest, he fired, and levered another cartridge home. The pony crashed in swirling dust, its rider catapulting across its withers. Another pony, unable to check its headlong rush, leaped over the threshing body. Again the Texan's rifle spanged and a second pony came down.

Squeezed into single file, for the passage was too narrow to admit two abreast, the remaining Apaches milled in the cut. Tex could see nothing through the ever-thickening dust. In quick succession he loosed two more shots into the murk, was rewarded by a shrill yelp of agony. Then, from behind the cover of a rocky portal, he waited.

Gradually, the dust settled, revealing the bodies of two ponies, one still kicking feebly. Of the Apaches there was no sign.

He reloaded the Winchester and dropped it back into the boot, wiped off the dirt and sweat that smeared his face with his bandanna. If it hadn't been for the buckskin's whinny, he thought grimly, all the gold in the world wouldn't have been worth a damn as far as he was concerned. His skull would have been split before now, or he would be cornered in the bungalow, destined to keep a date with death.

He draped the bandanna over his head as protection against the torrid sun rays and walked the pony along the trail that led back to the twin buttes.

That night he hunkered over a tiny fire in the solitudes. Overhead the stars sparkled like diamonds thick-strewn upon a velvet robe. Faint with distance, the half-human shriek of a mountain lion floated through the thin air. The picketed buckskin's cropping stopped as it raised an uneasy head.

But its rider, thoughtfully gazing at the tiny flame licking around crackling mesquite roots, was filled with an exhilaration that was as heady as new wine. Almost in a flash, he pondered, his whole life had been changed. Yesterday, he was a saddle bum; today he was a king. He plunged a hand into his pants pocket, watched the fat gold pieces trickle through his fingers. Gold! Gold! All he could ever use. Maybe four thousand dollars worth in his saddlebags and a fortune safely cached in Ghost Gulch. More gold than he had ever dreamed of.

Now he could beat Rock Robertson at his own game. He could hire punchers—hard cases like Rock Robertson's crew, men who would fight for his iron. He could become a cattleman; bigger than Rock maybe. He could grab range aplenty, free range that Rock held by force, and back his hand with lead, hot lead. Even when he was eying the gleaming coins, fingering them, it was still difficult to convince himself that this was not all a dream.

Then he stiffened at a sudden thought, and cold premonition chilled him. Coyote's body still lay in the rotting bungalow, the scars of torture plain upon him. He could not back-track and bury the old prospector, not with Apaches aplenty on the rampage. If he rode into Skull Creek and started throwing gold around, they'd fasten the killing on him for sure. Deputy Sheriff Jeffries had no use for nesters. Coyote had been foully murdered—he had Coyote's gold. Who would be expected to believe his story of a mysterious killer who slipped away unscathed before his eyes. The Texan's forehead creased. How could he prove his innocence? How could he

convince the frosty-eyed Jeffries that Coyote had left the gold to him?

Pondering, he realized that it couldn't be done. Margery Lawson, Mike the bartender, everyone around town, knew him for a shirt-tail nester. Mike would swear he had ridden to Ghost Gulch to ferret out the location of Coyote's mine without a dollar. Right there was evidence enough to tighten a noose around his neck.

Somber now, Tex hashed the problem over. He could ride to the law shack, lay the four pouches in his saddlebags on Jeffries' desk, tell the whole story—and the sharp eyed deputy would name him for a slick killer.

Like the devil's laughter, the wild, hysterical howling of a coyote pack echoed the arid flats.

The Texan's eyes narrowed. This could be handled. First bank the gold that weighted his saddlebags at the bank in Butte City. That was forty miles from Skull Creek and he was unknown in the county seat. Later, he could spread a story around that a relative had died in the east, leaving him a rich legacy. Then no one would suspect he was spending Coyote's gold. He breathed easily again. It was simple if a fellow figured it out!

Mind once more at rest, Tex kicked the embers of his fire apart and rolled up in his slicker—to dream.

Lights were winking on in Skull Creek when his pony stirred the dust on Main Street. He stepped down outside the Trading Post, looped his reins around the rail, checked as he was about to head into the store. He needed a hat, but all he had to buy it with was a pocketful of twenty-dollar gold pieces. Nesters didn't tote gold around. Fiddling with the tied reins, he debated this new problem. He'd have to eat, too. He hadn't swallowed a mouthful since leaving the gulch the previous day.

At a hunch, he unbuckled his gunbelt, wrapped it in his slicker and secured it to his saddle.

Old Ephraim, one of the clerks, was trailing a stepladder

down the broad aisle of the store, lighting oil lamps suspended from the beams overhead, when he entered.

Tex lounged against the counter and watched him complete his chore. Then, when the bespectacled Ephraim had folded the ladder and set it in a corner, he asked for a Stetson.

The clerk eyed his shabby garb doubtfully. "Stetsons come high, mister," he quavered in a high-pitched voice, "Nigh on twenty dollars."

Heck, thought Tex, what was twenty dollars, when a man had a trunk full of gold! He was about to retort curtly that the price was all right when caution probed. Nesters didn't buy twenty-dollar hats.

"Carrying anything a mite cheaper?"

"Sell yuh a good hat for seven and a half, or a lid for five."

"Gimme a lid," said Tex carelessly and followed the stoop-shouldered clerk to the dry goods section.

Tex made his selection.

When he tendered a twenty-dollar gold piece in payment, he fancied he glimpsed a flicker of suspicion in the clerk's lack-luster eyes. Or was it jumpy nerves, he wondered. He'd never know he had nerves before.

"The price of a good gun and belt," he explained gruffly, touching his waist. "It's hell when a feller's got to peddle his hardware to cover his head and fill his belly."

The clerk grunted with bored disinterest. It was a relief to Tex to get out of the store with a handful of small change.

Across the street the window of The Four Aces glowed yellow. Might just as well brace Mike, he thought cheerlessly, and get that settled.

The barkeep chuckled when he jingled across the floor of the saloon. "Back again! With a new lid. You must have located Coyote's gold." He winked at the townsman he was serving. Faint interest stirred among the patrons thinly strung along the bar. Several heads turned towards the dust-powdered rider with the new hat.

Tex grinned. "I shoul'da taken your advice, Mike. All I lo-

cated was an Apache raiding party. They lifted my hat and I was lucky to slip away with my scalp."

"So yez niver reached the gulch?" Mike set a bottle and glass before him.

"Nope," declared the Texan loudly, "I never did, and I'm not trying again."

"Ye shows sense, my bhoy," approved the barkeep, "what good is gold if you lose your hair?"

Tex was digging for a silver coin, fumbling for fear he would produce a double eagle, when Mike, mistaking the reason for his hesitation, waved his hand. "It's on the house, begorra! If my mind serves me rightly ye had nothing better than a beer check when yez hit for the Barrens and I took that over the bar."

Thought of the twenty dollar gold piece he had cashed in the Trading Post jumped into Tex's mind. What would Mike think if he heard of that?

Pondering, he poured a drink and was glad the affable barkeep was kept busy further down the bar. Before Mike could question him further he strode outside, hesitated, then thought of the restaurant. It was a long day's ride to the county seat. He had to eat.

When he pushed aside the grimy fly-curtains of Hans Wurd's Good Eats a row of empty stools stood before him. Margery Lawson was stacking dirty dishes in the rear. It appeared that most everyone had eaten supper. Just as well, he thought, hanging his new hat on a peg and sliding onto a stool, no one would be asking fool questions.

He glanced towards the kitchen. The girl's back was towards him and it looked as though there was a sag to her shoulders. She must put in a long day, he considered, dishing out chuck to a passel of pesky waddies. Kind of tough in that hot restaurant, with no chance to get off her feet.

Margery Lawson turned around. He saw her start of surprise before she moved slowly down the counter. She took his order in chilled silence, set the steaming plate of food before



him. Then, in a tone of cool disinterest, asked, "Well, did you find your ghost gold?"

Tex almost dropped his fork. Seemed everyone in town knew of his trip to the Barrens.

"I don't get you!" he retorted, eying her squarely.

"Don't play the innocent, Tex Taylor!" she came back. "Didn't I see you load up with chuck at the store a week or more back, and didn't Mike say he feared the Apaches had raised your hair. Not that I care," she added tartly.

"Never reached the gulch," he grunted, busy with his food. "Too many 'Paches around."

"Then where have you been for a week?"

"Jest minding my own affairs!" he snapped. Mebbe that'll hold her, he thought. It did. Without another word the girl returned to her dish stacking and he finished his meal in awkward silence.

Margery did not come near him again until he drained his coffee mug and straightened, reaching for his hat.

"That will be a dollar," she said crisply, "If you have a dollar!"

For no reason that he could name, Tex stiffened with resentment. Why should he care what Margery Lawson thought about his comings and goings? What was it to her, or any woman, how much money he had? Impulsively, and without thought, he dipped into his pocket and brought out a handful of gold and silver. Too late, he regretted his imprudence, closed his fist and dropped the coin out of sight again. Avoiding her eyes, he fished out two silver dollars and pitched them on the counter.

She pushed one back.

"That's a tip!" he said shortly.

"You can keep your tip," she flashed. "Buy some scent for that doll-faced hussy you take riding. She needs it! And where did you get all that gold, Tex Taylor?"

"For gosh sakes!" he burst out angrily, "Is it any of your business?"

Focussed levelly upon him, the girl's eyes sparked accusa-

tion. "It's tainted money. You're ashamed! I can read it on your face!"

He could have sworn, as he blindly barged out upon that plankwalk, that her expression had subtly changed and there was entreaty in her clear blue eyes.

Raging inwardly at his dumb foolishness in allowing the girl to glimpse the gold, Tex stomped along the plankwalk. Then, nerves strumming, he jerked to a stop.

Vest hanging loose, straight-backed chair tilted against the front of the tin-roofed law shack was Deputy Sheriff Jeffries. Cigarette drooping from his lips, he sat relaxed, obviously enjoying the cool of evening.

Suspicion surged through Tex's frame. Cat-toed, he eyed the lounging deputy. Jeffries hadn't been there when he entered the restaurant. He'd never seen the deputy sitting outside his shack before. Was the lawman waiting for him to pass in order to brace him about Coyote's killing?

A moment's reflection, and commonsense crushed the Texan's fears. No one in Skull Creek knew Coyote was dead. How could they know? Then why was Jeffries waiting? Tex thought of the clerk in the Trading Post and the double eagle. The deputy was as cagey as an old lobo. Nothing much happened around town that didn't reach his sharp ears. Maybe he knew from Mike that he—Tex—was flat broke when he rode into the Barrens. Maybe Jeffries knew, too, that he'd just broke a twenty-dollar gold piece. He could ask some awkward questions.

Tex's head swivelled as he sought a means of reaching his tied pony without passing the deputy. It couldn't be done, unless he crossed the street and then recrossed, which would make his purpose as plain as the ears on a mule. Did gold always make a man feel like this, as techy as a tomcat, scared of everyone, shying at his own shadow? It was the first time in his life that sight of a law badge had loosed butterflies in his belly. What had he to be scared of, anyway? Nobody knew anything. No one knew he had reached Ghost Gulch. No one had seen him uncover Coyote's gold.

He braced himself, took a deep breath and sauntered ahead, past the Elite Barber Shop, past the alley that yawned beside it, past Decker's pool-room. It was only a few paces until he was abreast of the bleak-eyed deputy, but it seemed like a mile. He felt Jeffries' eyes upon him, but kept his gaze focussed ahead. Another step and he'd be clear.

Clear-cut, Jeffries' voice stopped him in his tracks, "Wal, did you find Coyote in good health, Texan?"

## CHAPTER 10

AT THE deputy's laconic question, Tex fought a swift surge of panic. Inwardly cursing his jittery nerves, he forced himself to meet Jeffries' eyes.

"How would I know how the old moseyback's feeling?" he countered.

"Ain't you back from the gulch?"

"Nope." He repeated the story he had told Mike.

Jeffries listened with no surprise. "Yep," he drawled at its conclusion, "You showed good sense. Them doggoned 'Paches are getting peskier than horse-flies. Bunch of braves carved up three Mex woodcutters, south of Mineral, a day or so back. Some day they'll lift Coyote's topknot, sure'n hell. I done warned the old coot plenty."

Relief flooded the Texan as he stood rolling a cigarette and listening to the deputy. "Wouldn't be a mite surprised if they blew out his lamp," he agreed. "Me, I crave to keep my hair on. So long!"

Curbing an impulse to hurry from the vicinity of the lawman, he sauntered to his pony, untied the knotted reins and stepped into the saddle. It was not until he was clear of town, jogging along the Butte City road, that he relaxed. He wouldn't have stuck around Skull Creek another day, with the uneasy secret roiling in his mind, for all the gold in his saddlebags.

Two days later he drifted down the Main Street of Butte

City, the county seat. It didn't have much more to offer than Skull Creek, he decided, and it hadn't changed a mite since he filed on his quarter-section at the Land Office in the dingy county courthouse over a year back.

The buckskin crow-hopped at the shrill whistle of a freight engine, shuttling empty stock cars, beyond the little red-painted depot. He passed the gloomy wooden courthouse, eyed the tall, narrow windows of the offices on the second floor. They had taken fourteen dollars of his hard-earned savings in there and given him a paper that certified he was owner of one-sixty acres on Rattlesnake Creek, if he lived on the land and worked it. With thoughts of other nesters he had known, when he asked the clerk if he'd likely have trouble from cowmen, the plump office-holder had smiled smugly and assured him he needn't worry, Uncle Sam owned that land and Uncle Sam would back him. He'd done his share, but Uncle Sam hadn't lived up to his part of the bargain. Like hell, he hadn't! King Colt ruled the range and a homesteader's title to his land was as useless as last year's calendar. Now he had gold. Gold would buy guns, and guns laid down the law in Apache Valley.

Outside the rock-fronted Apache County Bank, he kneed the buckskin to the hitch-rail. Looping the reins loosely around the smooth-worn rail, he slipped off the saddlebags and swung them across his shoulder. Pulse speeding, he pushed back the heavy, swinging door of the bank and stepped inside.

There wouldn't be any trouble, he told himself. There couldn't be any trouble. The dinero he was packing was his—and who would have cause to doubt it? Nevertheless, there was an uneasy alertness in his eyes as he crossed the waxed floor.

Behind a counter that spanned the room, a young fellow in shirt-sleeves was perched upon a high stool, bent over a ledger. Another, old man, with thinning snow-white hair and pinched features, stepped out from behind a wicket marked "Cashier." Been in the wars, thought Tex, noting that the lid

of the cashier's left eye dropped over an empty socket and the eyebrow was twisted by a blue scar that bit deep into it.

Tex dropped the heavy saddlebags with a thud on the counter, unstrapped one and slid out two leather pouches. He loosened the thong around the neck of one and emptied its gleaming contents upon the polished counter. One by one, he spilled gold from the remaining pouches atop the glittering pile.

"You pack plenty gold," commended the cashier dryly.

"Price of my spread in Texas," came back the Texan, his voice offhand. "Figured I'd sell out and hunt fresh grass."

There was a hint of challenge in his voice as he eyed the cashier narrowly, seeking to read doubt in his thin features.

But no change of expression showed upon the other's face. Methodically he commenced to count the gold, stacking the coins in neat piles. Even the young fellow at the ledger did not raise his head at the sound of the clinking metal. Gold meant nothing to these men, thought Tex, with growing relief. They handled it with no more concern than if they were tallying brass beer checks.

The cashier paused, his one eye dwelt inquiringly upon the Texan, "Seven thousand two hundred and eighty?"

Tex nodded, masking elation, he had figured around four thousand.

"I'll bank six thousand," he came back carelessly, "Reckon I can use the balance."

"Sure!" agreed the cashier tonelessly. He pushed several stacks of coin towards the Texan, carelessly swept the empty pouches off the counter, began to recheck the remaining gold.

"Say," said Tex, "I can use one of them pouches."

The cashier's eyebrows raised, then with an apologetic smile he reached down, picked up a limp pouch and tossed it onto the counter.

Finally, the routine of opening the account was completed. Tex stuffed a small deposit book into a vest pocket and lifted the saddlebags. But as he was moving away, the white-haired cashier checked him, "Mr. Magregor, the manager, likes to

meet our new depositors," he said affably. "I'll step over and see if he's busy."

Tex hesitated, suspicion again stirring. He opened his mouth to plead haste, but the cashier was already walking briskly towards a small office at the end of the counter. The word "Manager" was neatly lettered upon the frosted glass of its panelled door.

While the Texan fidgeted, the cashier tapped on the door, opened it and entered. In a minute or so, his head bobbed out and he beckoned.

Shouldering his saddlebags, Tex moved forward, entered a small room. A plain carpet covered the floor and an oak filing cabinet stood in a corner. At a roll-top desk, set against the wall, sat a middle-aged man with balding head. He was neatly dressed in a white shirt, with black string tie, and dark pants.

"Meet Mr. Taylor, formerly of Three Rivers, Texas," said the cashier suavely. "He has opened an account and deposited six thousand-gold."

He turned to Tex. "This is Mr. Magregor, the manager." With that he stepped out and closed the door behind him.

"Take a seat, Mr. Taylor," invited the bank manager, swinging around in his swivel chair. His shrewd eyes, set deep in square features, probed the visitor.

Tex dropped on to the edge of a chair, heartily wishing he was out on the street. The less attention he aroused the better. Now that fool cashier, well meaning, maybe, had pushed him to the fore.

"Locating around Butte City?" inquired Magregor, his gaze running over the Texan's trail-stained garb.

"Mebbe," returned Tex, noncommittally.

"So you're from Texas. A little hazardous, don't you think, carrying—er—six thousand dollars in gold?"

"Not when I pack this, too." Tex tapped his gun butt.

The manager smiled, "Self-sufficient, like all Texans, eh? Well, I will say you deliver the goods." He rose, extended his hand. "If I can help you any time, don't hesitate to ask. This

is a great country for a young fellow like you, with initiative and capital."

Glad to get away, Tex gripped the other's hand briefly and hurried outside.

No sooner had the outside door swung behind him, when the cashier slipped into the manager's office. He dropped three empty leather pouches upon the desk. "What did you make of him?" There was lurking excitement in the eager question.

Magregor shrugged, "A run-of-the-mill cowpuncher, except that there were notches on his gun butt."

"And his holster was swivelled," put in the other. "I swear that gold is part of a Wells Fargo shipment. They used that type of pouch when I was with the First National of Kansas City, ten years back."

The manager picked up one of the soft leather pouches, examined it curiously. "So you think that gold is the proceeds of a robbery, Whitey?"

"How else did those pouches get into the hands of that saddle-pounder? They were never issued to the public. The man was edgy—I could sense it as I checked the deposit."

"Hm." Magregor frowned at the empty pouches. "There may be a simple explanation—and there may not. Who but a fool would attempt to bank stolen gold?"

"Why not?" challenged the cashier. "I gamble that gold was looted ten—fifteen years back, in Texas maybe. That ranahan thinks it's safe to circulate it now."

"Tut, tut, Whitey. Fifteen years ago that young fellow was packing school books, not a gun."

"I still claim the gold was stolen," insisted the cashier stubbornly.

"Well," conceded Magregor, "Drop a note to Wells Fargo, stating the facts. You might send them a description of Taylor, too. In the meantime, do nothing to arouse the man's suspicions. He may be quite innocent."

Whitey snorted. He had no love for bank robbers. One had shot out his left eye.

Meanwhile, Tex was in high spirits. The first part of his plan had gone through without a hitch. The next step was to return to Ghost Gulch and remove the balance of the gold cache.

After a quick two-fingers in a nearby saloon, he headed for a livery barn and feed lot on the edge of town. Within an hour he left Butte City. A pack pony trailed him on a lead rope.

No longer did he follow the dusty stage road that curved southwest across the swales in the direction of Skull Creek. He kept the sun at his back, angling across open country and heading for the upper end of the valley. On the stage road he was liable to meet other riders. The sight of the pack pony with empty kiacks might prompt questions. It would be better if he could make this trip unobserved.

Rattlesnake Creek, he figured, lay about thirty miles ahead. He could camp along the creek that night and be hidden deep in the Barrens before the sun rose high again.

Luck sided him. He met nothing but jack rabbits and a few stray Lazy S cows. It was starlight when he urged the leg-weary buckskin across the shallow ford where Rattlesnake and Skull Creek joined. The pack pony was dragging on the lead, too.

He rode along the willow-fringed creek for a few hundred yards, and stepped down. Taking no chance of attracting the attention of wandering Circle R night-riders, he built no fire. After watering and hobbling the ponies, he stretched out beneath the trees, content to make a supper of dry biscuit.

Deep-stirring excitement banished sleep. He could not keep his thoughts off the gold cached in Ghost Gulch. Body-weary and drowsy, he lay wrapped in his slicker, watching the stars through the branches interlaced overhead and listening to the steady cropping of the ponies. An alien sound drifted to his ears and brought him up upon an elbow. Faint but unmistakable, the muted thunder of a moving herd rumbled through the still night air, punctuated by the shrill yippees of the herders.



Wide awake now, the Texan gazed across creek at the darkened flats. He could-see nothing, but sound of the herd pulsated against his ears, steadily growing louder. A bunch of cows was moving off Circle R range, moving fast, and heading for the ford. Why would Rock push stock across the creek at night, away from his own range, pondered Tex. In a flash the answer leapt into his mind—rustlers. And they were no pikers. This was no lightning roundup of a dozen cows, but a drive.

Quickly, he threw off the slicker, yanked on his boots and ghosted beneath the willows back to the ford. At the base of the gaunt old cottonwood that stood sentry on the west bank, battered by storm and blasted by the sun, high water had eroded the sandy soil, exposing the knotted roots and hollowing out a shallow cave.

Tex squirmed between the roots and weaseled back into the darkness. Completely concealed, water lapping almost at his boots, he had a plain view of the ford, a smooth sheet of dark water where the creek shallowed. On the further bank, a broad sandy trail wound down to the water's edge. These raiders took no chances, he mused. There were treacherous quicksands in Rattlesnake. They knew the valley.

The herd was close now. Bellowing of protesting steers mingled with the hoarse yelling of the rustlers and the sharp crack of whips, as they pushed the stock along.

Dark forms shadowed the trail across creek. The lead steers drifted down to water, hesitated, with lowered heads. Others pressed behind, bunching on the brink of the ford. "Hyjah! Hyjah!" A rider, breaking through the brush, hazed the leaders into the stream. Then a brown torrent of cows, horns clacking, flowed across the ford. Tex counted four riders. In the starlight he picked out Cherokee's paint pony and was not unduly surprised. But a tight oath ripped from his lips at sight of a rider in the drag whose right arm was tightly bound against his chest with greyed bandages. It was Swivel-Eye from the Circle R.

Herd and riders vanished through roiling dust and the

disturbed waters of the creek again smoothed out. Tex crawled from his hiding place and lit down creek at a fast pace towards his hobbled saddle pony.

Screened by the dust of the drag, he drifted along in the wake of the rustled herd. Beyond the creek, it swung westward. Pushing the lowing steers hard, the rustlers hit for the rim of the valley.

The terrain swelled into smooth-rolling hills. Grass thinned out until only shrivelled patches scabbed the ground, fighting for life in the heat-hardened soil. Still the rumbling herd pressed westward, heading for a wilderness of rock and cactus.

Finally, the Texan wheeled his pony and headed back to the valley. Cherokee's purpose was plain now. He was driving into the Barrens. His spread lay somewhere to the north. Until they reached the hard rock of the wastelands, the herd would leave a trail as plain as a wagon through snow. When the cows hit rock, sign would be erased. Then the 'breed would circle northward, throw the rustled herd into a blind canyon somewhere in the maize of hills, change the brands and trail the cows to some distant market. It was as simple as that, particularly since he had an "eye" right in Rock Robertson's bunkhouse. Swivel-Eye could spot the stock and keep Cherokee acquainted with the whereabouts of Rock's night guards. With that setup, Cherokee could drain the Circle R dry.

But one thought bit into the musing Texan—Cherokee had been "bleeding" Rock's herds, but the nesters on Rattlesnake Creek had shouldered the blame. The cowman could trail his rustled cows across the creek, follow them until sign disappeared in the confusion of the Barrens. Someone, Swivel-Eye maybe, had sworn the nesters were running off the stock. It sure, admitted Tex, must have looked that way. So that was why Rock had burned them out.

That's what a fellow got for keeping within the law—blame for another's misdeeds.

It seemed to Tex that he had scarcely rolled up in his slicker again before light showed in the east. He boiled a pot of coffee, saddled up and rode along the creek bank, masked by the willows. Higher and higher into the hills, he followed the curves of the shrinking stream, then angled off to the southwest, crossing a No Man's Land on the fringe of Circle R range where grass was poor, too poor to run stock. He breathed more easily now. It was unlikely that anyone would cut his trail before he hit Ghost Gulch, unless it was a party of marauding Apaches.

But, as the day dragged on, and he pushed deeper and deeper into the solitudes, no signal fires coiled pencil-like towards the sky . . . another noon, and he pushed through the portals of Ghost Gulch. The barrels of the two dead ponies still bulked in the gloomy corridor of glistening rock. Tensed the sound of his ponies' hooves muffled by the thick dust, Tex inched ahead, Winchester cradled across his saddlehorn. He was loco, he told himself, riding into the gulch alone, after scraping out by the skin of his teeth, but a few days before. But to hire other riders to side him meant divulging a secret he was willing to risk his life to preserve.

The walls dropped away and once again he was gazing at the ghost town. He checked the buckskin, surveyed the silent buildings, searching for signs of lurking Apaches. Nothing moved, save a tawny cat stalking a lizard. Still cautious, he unbuckled a saddlebag, pulled out a spyglass, adjusted it and studied the chaparral at the far end of the gulch.

Not a twig stirred. Beyond the spring, grey squirrels were playing in the branches of a piñon. Satisfied that no lurking Apaches were around, Tex dropped down into the gulch. Cats still scurried around the bungalow and he could guess why. He tied the ponies to the porch railing and eagerly stepped around to eye the smooth patch of earth that covered his gold.

But it was no longer smooth!

The shovel lay where it had been carelessly dropped upon the ground. In the center of the patch was the chest half-

buried, lid flung back. One startled glance and he saw that it was empty.

Eyes distended, mouth agape, the Texan stood transfixed, his horrified gaze fixed on the empty chest. Numbed by the shock, he could only stare stupidly. Then his mind began to function. Black depression weighted him as he realized that the cache had been looted, and now his golden dreams had no more substance than a gorgeous mirage fading into thin desert air.

## CHAPTER 11

FROM habit, as the stunning shock of his loss wore off, Tex searched the loose earth for sign of the looter. There was sign aplenty. The tracks of a pair of high-heeled riding boots were plain everywhere. One man, considered the Texan, had dug up the chest. Who was he?

Tex's thoughts strayed to Coyote's torturer. Too late—the Texan realized that he must have concealed himself in the gulch and watched while he—Tex—dug up the gold. When the Apaches drifted away he had looted the cache.

For a while the Texan wryly eyed the disordered patch of earth, then with a shrug, turned away. No sense in chewing the cud, he told himself. He had swallowed a bitter pill. Now it was down he might just as well forget it. The chest of gold always had seemed too good to be true. At least he had collected over seven thousand dollars on the deal, and that wouldn't fade away. Six thousand was safe in the Apache Valley Bank and most a thousand more was stowed in his saddlebags. That was more dinero than he'd ever owned in his life before.

He mounted the buckskin and, without a backward glance, headed for the mouth of the gulch. The useless pack pony trailed behind.

When he jogged into Skull Creek the following day Pee-

wee's chunky form straightened from beneath the canopy of The Four Aces. Tex reined to the rail.

"Figured you was pounding leather for the Lazy S," he drawled.

"Nope," replied the blocky puncher dismally. He broke into verse:

"I ride and rope and doctor cows  
And shoot and cook and fence and swab  
But now they've turned me out to browse  
For damned if I can land a job."

"Too bad." sympathized the Texan. He stepped down and tied his ponies. The pair hunkered against the front of the saloon.

"You pulling out?" Peewee jerked his head at the pack pony.

"Ain't nothing in the valley," returned Tex noncommittally.

"If I had a stake," sighed the squat puncher, "I'd be as snug as a bug in a rug.

"I know a spot so fair to see,  
The water's pure, the grass is high;  
A paradise it seemed to me  
Where I could live and gladly die."

"Where's it lay—behind the Golden Gates?" inquired Tex dryly.

"No siree, right in this here valley."

"Then I gamble the Circle R claims it."

"It's a good six miles beyond Rock's north line," corrected Peewee, a faraway look in his eyes. "Come upon it one day when I was hunting strays. Prettiest little valley you ever set your eyes on. Grass hock high, dandy spring, shade for stock. Just waiting for some lucky gent to ride in, build him a cabin and live ace-high. Me—I always craved to file on it, but I could never get together more'n cigarette money."

"You still got the right to file?" inquired Tex, with rising interest.

"Sure. I was just squatting on Rattlesnake."

Tex built a cigarette, thinking hard. He'd been smoked out of one spread and the law didn't allow filing on another. But Peewee could file. With two guns they should be able to hold their own. "Peewee," he said abruptly. "Quit dreaming—the valley's yours!"

"You quit your funnin'," grunted the stocky puncher. "Ain't it enough to have Lady Luck swipe the silver lining off my cloud without you hurrahin' me?"

"Hurrahin', hell! I've got a stake in the bank at Butte City. We can get us a wagon and supplies, build us a shack and maybe run a few cows."

Peewee gazed doubtfully at his companion's lean features. Slowly the doubt faded from his eyes, succeeded by a mounting elation that finally exploded in a joyous "Yippee!" He swallowed. "If this ain't my lucky day! Your handle should have been Santa Claus."

Tex grinned at his enthusiasm. "Wal," he pronounced, "I guess we ride to Butte City, and you can file on this paradise. Can you locate it again?"

"Locate it!" howled Peewee. "I could find that spot if I was blindfolded, hogtied and so drunk I couldn't hit the ground with my hat in three tries. Yessiree!"

"Then let's grab us a bite to eat and hit the trail."

"Eat," echoed the stocky puncher. "I most forgot how. My belly button's shaking hands with my backbone. Last camp spot, I ate the grass so short my horse walked plumb past me without speaking."

"Maybe we should head for the livery barn, they got good dried grass," suggested Tex gravely.

"I'm no hog, let the horses eat it," came back Peewee. He scrambled to his feet and headed for the Good Eats.

"Gimme a small steer—well-done, a sack of spuds, fried crisp, and two buckets full of cawfee," demanded the stocky puncher, climbing upon a stool in the restaurant.

"Would a large steak serve—as an appetizer?" inquired Margery Lawson, smiling at the homely rider.

"Anything you serve suits me, Miss Marg."

She turned frostily to Tex on the adjoining stool. "And yours?"

"Steak." he responded gruffly.

Peewee was bursting to spread news of good luck. "Marge," he announced gleefully. "Me and Tex is cowmen from now on. We're gonna get ourselves a herd and an iron, and build us the swellest spread in Apache Valley."

She eyed him with amusement, "On what—your gall?"

"Nope, Tex got the dinero, banked in Butte City."

"Banked." The girl's candid blue eyes rested upon Tex's clouded features. He could cheerfully have wrung the little rooster's neck for revealing their plans. Margery Lawson knew he didn't have a dollar when he rode into town, leaving the smoking ruins of his homestead on Rattlesnake Creek.

"Just got some dinero from Texas. Sold some land down on the Rio Grande," he explained lamely.

"But you told me—" she began.

"Bottle it." He growled, "I don't tell everything."

"Oh." There was a world of expression in the exclamation. Stiffening, she turned away.

Peewee's puzzled gaze shuttled from one to the other. He sensed that something was wrong, and that his unbridled tongue was responsible. "Maybe," he told Tex contritely, "I should have buttoned my lip."

"It might be better if you saved a little of your breath for panting," agreed the other, frowning at Margery's straight back.

They ate their meal in silence, but the exuberant Peewee could not remain quiet for long. He dipped a finger in his gravy and traced the outline of an Indian Teepee on the counter. "T.P." he crowed, "Got it—Teepee! Tex & Peewee. That'll be our brand. Ain't it a dandy?" As Margery moved towards them to collect for the meal he hastily erased the brand with his shirt sleeve. Seemed like she wasn't favorably

disposed towards the new iron soon to appear in Apache Valley.

Room #7 in the Stockmen's Hotel, Butte City, housed two tired but happy riders. Tex sat in a straightback chair by the open window, checking over a list of purchases. Peewee lay full length on the brass bedstead, in his socks, absorbing, with difficulty, the contents of the *Butte Bulletin*.

They had spent two busy days in the county seat, Tex had bought a wagon and team, and filled the wagon with supplies, ranging from stove to sacked sugar, acquired a small herd of she stock and two grade bulls. Immersed in the task of stocking and equipping the new spread, registering the brand, he had almost forgotten Coyote and the vanished gold.

"Gee willikens!" An amazed exclamation from Peewee pulled his head around.

"What's eating you?" he inquired.

"Coyote's dead! Lissen!" Laboriously, the squat rider spelled out:

## PROSPECTOR MURDERED

Coyote Cal, an eccentric prospector who worked an immensely rich claim in Ghost Gulch, deep in the Barrens of the Black Keweahs, was found stabbed to the heart in his cabin a few days ago by Wythington-Smythe, an Englishman who visited the gulch. The Sheriff's office has just received a report from Deputy Sheriff Jeffries of Skull Creek that the Englishman made a deal with Coyote Cal to rid the gulch of cats, with which it was overrun. When he arrived, the decomposed remains of the prospector were lying in the shack. Smythe immediately returned to Skull Creek and informed Jeffries who promptly investigated. He reports that the lonely prospector had been horribly tortured and finally stabbed to death. Reason for the torture was obviously to compel



the unfortunate man to reveal the whereabouts of his mine. It is, of course, impossible to state whether the killer succeeded in his purpose or not, but an empty trunk, half-buried in the ground outside the cabin leads to the conclusion that his cache had been raided. Jeffries states that two sets of foot-prints were distinctly visible around the trunk, which indicates that two men were involved. Mexicans are suspected of the crime. It is known that the prospector had a large amount in gold coin in his possession. When found, his pockets were empty and there was nothing of value in the cabin. For several years he has been a well-known figure in Skull Creek, which he visited each month for supplies, always spending liberally and boasting of his wealth. Although a number of men have visited Ghost Gulch to file claims adjoining the dead man's rich vein, none ever discovered the claim. His tragic death has stirred renewed interest in the mine and it is reported that several parties are proceeding to the gulch to make systematic search. Old-timers recall that many years ago the Keweah Mining Company, financed with eastern capital, spent large sums of money freighting in machinery and equipment to develop several promising veins discovered in the gulch. These, however, petered out and operations were also hampered by attacks of hostile Indians. Eventually, the project was abandoned. It is believed that the murdered man tapped one of these veins.

Peewee finished droning out the long account. He eyed his companion, "Wal, what d'ye think of that?"

"It don't surprise me none."

"Nope," agreed the stocky puncher. "There's jaspers around Skull Creek who'd slit a feller's throat for his boots. It reads like a Mex job." He became absorbed in another item.

Tex forgot his list and stared out of the window. So Coyote's remains had been discovered. Well, they were bound to be sooner or later. There was nothing to connect him with

the killing. Jeffries would likely hunt two men, working in cahoots. Probably comb the adobes in Skull Creek's Mexican quarter. But how about Margery Lawson? Would she connect his windfall with Coyote's death? And if so, would she inform the deputy of her suspicions? He would be in a heck of a tight if she did. Why worry, he asked himself, there was nothing they could tie on to. But something rankled, beyond fear of being accused of Coyote's death. He hated any woman to think he was a skulking knifer, least of all, Margery Lawson.

At sunup they pulled out of Butte City. Peewee sat on the seat of a heavily laden wagon, with his saddle horse tied to the end gate. Tex drove their newly acquired herd. Dust drifting lazily in their wake, they rolled slowly across the plain towards Peewee's cherished hidden valley.

For a while the wagon rumbled along the bank of Rattlesnake. Then Peewee angled northward, heading for the rolling hills, burnt brown and crisscrossed with chaparral-choked ravines. Beyond them, Tex knew, the terrain broke up into a rugged wilderness of rock and merged with the waterless chaos of the Barrens, into which Cherokee had driven the rustled Circle R herd. The 'breed had even better reason than Rock Robertson for not wanting nesters around.

Peewee's yell broke into the Texan's brooding thoughts. The stocky puncher was waving his whip and obviously laboring under great excitement.

"Lamp that V," he indicated a notch in the hills ahead. "That's where Hope Valley sets. I named it Hope Valley because the first time I set eyes on it, I sure hoped I'd own it some day. Never thought I'd get beyond hoping. Yes-sir, now I don't have to hope no more. Yippee!" His whip lash coiled over the backs of the laboring team, urging the horses to a clumsy gallop. The wagon lurched and bumped over the uneven ground. Tex held his breath and uttered a silent prayer that it wouldn't capsize.

When they pulled up to the notch and Hope Valley lay below them, sleeping in the sun, Tex had to agree that Peewee

had not overdrawn the picture. He had never seen a likelier spot for a ranch. Pear-shaped, and nestling amid smooth-rolling hills, the little valley was perhaps two miles long and a mile wide, lightly clothed with scrub oak. At the mouth of a wide draw on the western side, chaparral showed green.

"Dandy spring in that chaparral," chortled Peewee, heading his team downgrade towards the valley floor. "Look at that grass. Ain't better in the whole doggoned West!"

That night they made camp in the chaparral. Tex looked over the spring. It tumbled down the draw over miniature cascades, through thick-growing aspen, whose thousand tiny leaves pattered softly in the scarce-stirring air. Wouldn't be a big job, figured the Texan, to build a tank and run the spring into it. Then they'd have plenty water for all the stock they'd ever run.

Through ensuing days the two were as busy as beavers, building a cabin, setting the posts of a corral, fencing off a pasture. Fresh branded with the new Teepee stamp iron, their few cows contentedly ranged the valley.

Peewee made one trip with the wagon to Skull Creek for supplies. Tex stayed in the valley. He just couldn't bring himself to face the scrutiny of Margery's accusing blue eyes.

It seemed that at last he had found the peace that had been denied him on Rattlesnake Creek. No one came near Hope Valley, although one morning Tex saw a speck that might have been a rider moving across a distant hillside. Before he could get his spyglass, it disappeared from view.

Then the peaceful silence of the drowsy Teepee was shattered by an unexpected visitor. A wagon, drawn by two scrawny mules, toiled through the notch at the southern end of the valley. From it arose a confused banging and jangling, muted by distance. Tex and Peewee, stripped to the waist, were setting fence posts. Peewee wiped the sweat from his forehead as they straightened and watched the lumbering vehicle creaking across the floor of the valley, the clanking and clattering growing louder every minute.

"I got it!" grinned the stocky puncher. "It's a band wagon.

If a feller located on the North Pole, I gamble some doggoned range peddler would dig him out." But Tex recognized the mules and watched the decrepit vehicle with puzzled eyes.

The air was pulsating now with the clatter of tinware, rattling of pots and pans, squeaking of gritty axles. Close by, the bony mules came to a halt and the lanky form of Chauncey Wythington-Smythe dropped down from the wagon seat. Shabby tweeds greyed with dust, he strode towards them. But it was a vastly different Wythington-Smythe from the booze-soaked Dude Tex had seen in The Four Aces. Beneath the grey Stetson, his features were browned by the sun, and seemed harder, keener. There was a spring to his step and a squareness to his shoulders that had been absent before.

"Howdy," hailed Peewee. "You turned range peddler?"

"Yes, indeed," smiled the Dude. "I am now a preambulating merchant. Like a Phoenician of old, I venture across uncharged wastes bringing the blessings of civilization to rugged pioneers. Saddle-soap and saucepans; saws and sewing needles, I carry them all. At a price, moreover, that will make your pocketbook chortle with delight."

Tex nodded towards the bench set against the front of their newly-built shack, shaded by a giant oak. "Rest your legs, Hyphen," he invited. "We can give you a drink from the olla, but we got nothing stronger."

"I crave nothing stronger." There was a subtle change in the Dude's voice, a hardening in his glance as he eyed the Texan. "You behold a man who has conquered the demon rum. For Chauncey Wythington-Smythe, nature's own nectar suffices."

"We ain't got nothing but plain water, like Tex said," supplied Peewee guilelessly. "I never heard of this here nectar."

The Dude slapped him on the back, "Cheer up, old boy, 'where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise.'"

They settled on the bench in the grateful shade of the oak.

"Can't figure how you raised the dinero to turn peddler?"

commented the candid Peewee. "Don't tell me you put that cat deal over!"

"I did, by jove!" The Dude tamped dust-dry tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. "I gathered cats in Ghost Gulch—a ghastly job! Conveyed them to Mineral, where I was received with open arms. I could have sold more, but one load was enough." He set a match to his pipe, then added fervently, "More than enough—I bear the scratches yet!"

"How come you swore off the snake-eye?"

The Dude puffed his pipe meditatively. "During the weary trek across the Barrens with those infernal cats I thought deeply about my career. The awful loneliness of those silent wastes does something to one. I determined that I would turn over a new leaf, that the future pages of my life would be shining and unbesmirched. Now I shun strong drink as though it were the foulest poison." He smiled modestly.

"I reckon Coyote warn't a pleasant sight," observed Peewee, abruptly changing the subject.

"That reminds me." The Dude's voice was edged. "I drove from Skull Creek upon a most unpleasant mission." He rose quickly and strode to the wagon. Withdrawing something from beneath the fly, he headed back.

Stepping up to Tex, he handed him a battered Stetson. "Your hat, I believe," he observed stiffly, "At least it bears your name burnt into the sweatband."

The Texan nodded, his thoughts in a ferment. He had lost that hat in Ghost Gulch.

"Well, you yellow killer," said the Dude stonily, "You can keep your blasted hat. You know where I found it! But give me the watch you stole from poor old Coyote after you murdered him. I treasure that hunter more than anything I own."

"And if you don't get the watch?" Tex's voice was brittle.

"I shall most certainly notify the law."

## CHAPTER 12

IMPOTENT anger gripped the Texan. Loss of the Stetson had slipped his mind. Now the battered old hat had returned to plague, and maybe, condemn him.

"Was I the only hombre to ride into Ghost Gulch?" he demanded. "And as for that damned ticker, I've never seen it since you tried to peddle it in the saloon. Get right back on that wagon seat and hump your tail, before I forget you ain't heeled."

Paling before the menace in Tex's eyes, the Dude nevertheless held his ground. "I'm not an officer of the law," he returned firmly. "The murder is none of my business, but I demand my watch."

"Tex ain't no yellow killer!" broke in Peewee indignantly, watching the play with intent eyes. "That was a Mex job."

The Dude pointed to the hat. "Isn't that rather difficult to explain away?" he came back coldly.

"That's what you figure." Tex was more composed now. "Take the weight off your legs," he invited gruffly. "Maybe we should hash this over."

Dubiously, the Dude sank down again upon the bench.

The Texan, his brow creased, built a smoke, puzzling how he could frame words to convince the Englishman of his innocence.

"Listen, Hyphen." While the two listened in amazed silence, he told of the mysterious killer who tortured Coyote, his escape and the prospector's death, omitting mention of the gold. "If I was snake-blooded enough to torture and knife Coyote," he concluded, "and you were the only jasper who could put a rope around my neck, wouldn't I just naturally beef you pronto?"

The Dude's lips tightened. He glanced quickly at Peewee's hostile countenance on one side and the Texan's bronzed features on the other, then around the valley, empty save for a few grazing cows. Deep in the hills, at this lonely home-

stead, these men could kill and bury him. Who would be the wiser? And a man who would callously knife a lonely prospector would certainly have no compunction in shooting him to save his neck.

He frowned as he considered the Texan's words and nodded an agreement.

"Logically," he agreed, "you are right. Perhaps I was a little hasty."

Peewee spat in disgust. "Hasty!" he growled. "You should know Tex wouldn't use a knife, and he sure ain't no sneak thief."

"But surely you should have reported the murder," remonstrated the Dude, forehead puckered as he pondered the Texan's story.

"Not me," came back Tex decisively. "They pay deputies to rod the law. Why should I horn in?"

"If I was in your boots, mister," pronounced Peewee ominously, eyeing the troubled Dude, "I'd sure look over my shoulder after sundown. I reckon the rattlesnake who made buzzard bait out of Coyote ain't feeling kindly about you."

"By jove!"

"And, you won't need a watch when you wear a wooden jacket," said Peewee unfeelingly.

The Dude rose, addressed Tex, "I withdraw my accusation," he announced, with dignity. "It is apparent that I displayed lack of judgment in making such a hasty conclusion. Circumstantial evidence can be vastly misleading. Good day, gentlemen!"

As they watched the wagon crawl back towards the Notch, Peewee turned indignantly to his pard, "If that pilgrim yawps around Skull Creek, he'll make plenty trouble for you, Tex."

"He won't," said the Texan. "Y' know," he added thoughtfully, "that Limey's got plenty sand in his craw. A fellow who could gather a wagonload of cats in Ghost Gulch and freight 'em to Mineral, through Apache country, and not pack even a slingshot, has sure got more than fiddlestrings for guts." His

voice was edged as he concluded, "I'd give my saddle to know who did beef Coyote."

The squat puncher said nothing. He was intent watching the break in the hills through which the wagon was crawling, beetle-like in the distance. "Heck, this must be visiting day."

Tex looked up. Four horsemen filed through the Notch and dropped in a compact bunch down to the valley floor. At a brisk canter, they rode towards the little shack on the edge of the chaparral. A big man, straddling a paint, was in the lead.

"Trouble!" said the Texan curtly. "That's Cherokee. You duck inside and cover the gents with that double-barrelled shotgun. I'll palaver."

The squat puncher hurried through the doorway, while Tex kept his seat. "Howdy, gents," he drawled, puffing nonchalantly upon a cigarette, as the four riders pulled rein—the hawk-nosed Cherokee and three bleak-faced punchers. Hard-case was stamped all over them.

Cherokee wasted no time with greetings. "We don't cotton to nesters on Hobbled O Range." There was flat finality in his deep voice.

"Figured this was open range. Ain't you located way back in the hills?"

"Ten miles northeast. You know range law, Texan. No cowman locates within a fifteen-mile circle of another."

"To hell with range law," came back Tex brittlely. "U.S. law says a citizen can file on government range. Peewee pre-empted this water and one-sixty acres."

He saw that the three riders behind Cherokee were drifting apart, so that each would have a clear field of fire. There was no mistaking their intent.

Without change of expression, the 'breed delivered his ultimatum, "You got ten minutes to drift, or we blast you out of the valley."

Tex met the hostile eyes of the four Hobbled O riders. Now in a row, they sat motionless upon their ponies, right hands hanging free. One word from Cherokee, he thought,



and he'd be crow bait. Another scene flashed into his mind—a grey dawn on Rattlesnake Creek, his spread burning, while a silent circle of Circle R riders watched with expressionless eyes. He'd been run off once, but never again, he vowed mentally.

"Blast away." His voice was indifferent.

The twin muzzles of a double-barrelled shotgun showed in the square aperture that served as window above his head. Behind them, Peewee's head bobbed up. "Yep, blast away, gents," he repeated genially. "And if I don't get you all with this greener, I'll quit punching cows and herd sheep."

Before the threat of the shotgun, swinging in a short arc, the Hobbled O riders shifted uneasily in their saddles. The hawk-nosed Cherokee sat statuelike, only his beady eyes swivelling from the shotgun to the lounging Texan on the bench.

"Mister," drawled Tex, breaking a silence as brittle as thin glass. "We don't cotton to strangers on Teepee Range. Skeedaddle before we fill you so full of holes you won't float in brine!" Catlike, he was on his feet, right hand freezing onto his gun butt, eyes slitted, tensed for the draw.

Cherokee still made no movement. The tensed Texan could almost read the 'breed's thoughts as he eyed the swarthy, impassive features. Cherokee was weighing the odds. He knew that while they could down the Texan, the spreading charge of the shotgun, pointing wickedly from the window above him, would rip all four riders into ribbons. And Tex, lightning on the draw, would cut him down, too. With a grunt, he heeled the paint and wheeled away, his cohorts bunching behind him. Dust trailed them as they cantered down valley.

Peewee stepped out of the shack, the shotgun trailing from his right hand, "Ain't many jaspers crave to argue with Betsy!" he chortled, a wide grin on his freckled features.

"They'll be back," said the Texan somberly. "From now on we keep a night watch, and neither leaves the spread—alone."

The chunky puncher propped the shotgun against the front

of the shack, rolled a smoke. "I gamble Cherokee never run a cow in this valley," he grunted. "Can't figure why he should go on this prod."

Tex smiled faintly. "If he was driving Circle R cows over Rattlesnake and herding them back into the hills, would he want strangers around?"

"I guess not."

"Wal, that's his play—he's chowsing 'em off in big chunks." Tex told of the herd that crossed the ford.

"Jiminy!" exclaimed the squat puncher, "So that's why Rock Robertson claimed the nesters swung sticky ropes. He's been trailing stock across the creek right along."

"Cherokee," said Tex evenly, "is so damned crooked he could swallow nails and spit out corkscrews."

"Goshawmighty!" howled Peewee, in such a tone of comic surprise that Tex eyed him sharply. The puncher was again staring intently at the Notch. "Maybe we should open a saloon," he commented, "for they're sure acrowdin' us. There's another gent heading thisaways."

The dark outline of a rider was silhouetted against the sky as he rode through the break in the hills. Behind him trotted a pack pony.

"B'gosh, if he ain't packing his soogans, likewise a fishing pole," announced Peewee breathlessly. "Mebbe we got us a boarder."

Curiously, they eyed the stranger as he jogged towards the shack. His spooled bed and a cumbersome square object were lashed to the pack pony, and what appeared to be a set of stout fishing poles stuck out from beneath the canvas.

A dozen paces from the two close-watching riders, he checked his pony and swung out of the saddle. Whipping out a white card from a vest pocket, he stepped towards them. "You have a wonderful location, gentlemen," he boomed sonorously, "and the neatest little cabin I have seen in many a day's ride."

Tex took the extended card. Peewee stretched his neck to catch a glimpse of the black type, which read:

PETE POWERS

*Photographer*

HIGH QUALITY — LOW PRICE

WEDDING PARTIES A SPECIALTY

"You have friends, relatives, perhaps sweethearts, who would treasure the gift that only you can give," droned on their visitor. "In years to come, your children will gaze at that treasured gift and say—"

"Thet's paw and his horse, paw's the one with the whiskers," broke in Peewee.

The photographer fixed him with a disapproving eye, turned to the pack pony and started to unlash his apparatus.

Tex watched curiously as he set the tripod in position, affixed a large square box upon it with thumbscrews, and shook the dust off a square of black velvet cloth. He moved with slow deliberation, a square-set, monkfaced man, with smooth features and shrewd eyes. His dark coat and pants bore the stains of a long trail and his black Stetson sagged with dust.

There was something amiss here, mused the Texan. This man was no lunkhead, but who but a fool would trail over thin-settled range on the chance of taking an occasional photograph when he could do triple the business, in a mite of the time, in town?

Meanwhile, the photographer draped the cloth over the box. Taking assent for granted, he led Peewee by the arm and posed him in front of the lens. He doffed his Stetson and his head disappeared beneath the velvet cloth. While the squat puncher waited patiently, he twirled screws, withdrew a square wooden frame from a leather case, slide it open in the back of the camera. Grasping a rubber ball dangling from the end of a rubber tube, he held up a warning hand, "Perfectly still, please, until I snap my fingers!"

For long seconds, face grimly set, Peewee faced the lens, still as a graven image. When the shutter finally clicked, he

relaxed with relief. Tex underwent the same ordeal. When a man spent at least a day riding to and from your spread it was hard to refuse him business.

"When do we get these here pictures?" inquired Peewee eagerly.

"Drop into the Trading Post next time you're in town," returned the photographer blandly. "If business warrants, I may open a store." He busied himself repacking his kit. "Doggone it!" murmured the squat rider, as the itinerant photographer rode away. "I ain't seen one of them picture gents since I was in Kansas City, three years back, with six carloads of Boxed E beef." A thought struck him. "By gosh, he didn't give us a price!"

"He warn't interested in price," returned Tex, his eyes following the black-coated figure, "He wanted our pictures."

"That don't make sense!" remonstrated Peewee.

"Nothing about that gent makes sense," came back the other. "Let's set some more fence posts afore we got another visitor." For the rest of the day, he fruitlessly tried to figure why anyone would want the pictures of two lonely homesteaders.

Peewee's singsong broke into his thoughts:

"Oh gimme a home in the sage-brush  
Afar from cities and strife,  
Where there ain't no worry nor trouble  
Oh gimme the peaceful life!

"Gimme a shack far out on the range,  
Where the skies are always blue,  
The sleepy, drowsy, friendly range  
But gimme a shot gun too!"

That night and every succeeding night, they stood watch from sundown to sunup, guarding against a surprise attack by Cherokee and his gang. But, after the first crowded day, nothing occurred to disturb the peace of Hope Valley. A week passed without incident. Tex was beginning to believe that

Cherokee had forgotten them, when a perturbed Peewee entered the shack one morning as he was cooking breakfast. "Ain't a cow critter in sight!" reported the stocky puncher.

"Maybe they wandered into the hills," said Tex. He set flapjacks and coffee on the bench that served as table. "Feed your tapeworm, then we'll take a pasear."

For the balance of the day they combed the hills and draws around the valley, but sighted neither horn nor hoof of the little Teepee herd. The cows had vanished as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed them.

Dry, dusty and disgusted, they unsaddled outside the shack as shadows veiled the valley. Dejectedly, Peewee dropped upon his bunk, while Tex started a fire in the stove and set on the coffeepot.

"Doggonit!" groaned the chunky puncher, "that beef ain't got wings, but if it ain't got wings, how in heck did it fly away?"

"Plain as the horn on your saddle," came back the Texan, repressed anger in his curt tones. "Cherokee hazed it off. That 'breed's as slick as a greased hog. He figured we'd be on the lookout for an attack, so he left us alone. 'Member, it was cloudy last night? When I took the graveyard shift it was as dark as a stack of black cats. He strung his gang across the valley and eased the whole kit and caboodle out through the Notch. Right now, I'll stake my roll they're corralled in a hideaway, likely with a passel of Circle R cows for company."

"Wal, let's go after 'em!"

"Sure," growled the Texan. "Ride out and gather 'em up—just like that! There's a sackful of canyons over the rim. We could ride the Barrens for a month and be damned lucky to see a jack rabbit."

"That snake-eyed 'breed ain't getting away with it!" declared Peewee vehemently, an unwonted storminess in his friendly eyes. "They string gents up for rustling!"

"When they can prove it," came back Tex dryly. "Here, swallow a mug of dip and listen."

The disconsolate Peewee sank upon an upended box, watched Tex pour hot coffee into two mugs.

"Wal," he challenged, "I'm listening."

Tex sipped his coffee, rolled a cigarette. "This is how I got it figured—Cherokee rustles Circle R stock regular, holds the beef in a hideaway and blotches the brands. A likely hideaway would be a box canyon, and there's plenty over the rim. The fellers handling the stock gotta eat. That means Cherokee packs in chuck from the Hobbled O. To locate the hideaway we gotta trail that chuck. Get me?"

"Plain as plowed ground! So we keep cases on the Hobbled O?"

"Starting at sunup, and we might just as well hit leather now and find us a spot. Kin you locate Cherokee's layout?"

The chunky rider nodded.

A sliver of moon floated through a nimbus of woolly cloud, and the terrain was peopled with uncertain shadows when the two riders, blanket rolls tied behind their cantles, jogged out of the little valley. Peewee took the lead, winding through waves of low-lying hills. For perhaps two hours they beat north and east, drifting through the silent night like two shadows. No sound marked their progress save the dull thud of their ponies' hooves and the faint creak of saddle leather, for neither was in a mood for talk.

Peewee checked his pony and Tex drifted abreast. Following the direction of the stocky puncher's pointing finger, Tex glimpsed a light, pin-pricking through the gloom ahead. "The Hobbled O?" he queried.

"Ain't no other spread hereabouts."

They eased ahead, until they again reined up on the rim of a shallow valley. On its far side, buildings were shadowed, lumped on the flank of a ridge, dark-patched with scrub.

"Let's hit the ridge," directed Tex. Eyes alert for sign of wandering Hobbled O riders, they skirted the valley and angled their blowing ponies up the slope of the ridge. Through-

out the night ride, reflected Tex, they hadn't scared up one Hobbled O cow.

On the further side of the ridge they breathed their mounts, then worked along the slope until they judged they were behind Cherokee's spread. Tying the ponies in a patch of brush, they unstrapped their spurs and scrambled up the yielding sandy soil of the slope . . . screened by a squat greasewood, they stared down at the dim shadows that were the roofs of the Hobbled O buildings, almost directly below. From one window, lamplight still cut through the night, a yellow shaft that gleamed like a watching eye.

### CHAPTER 13

THAT night the two riders rolled up in their blankets in a narrow gulch beyond the ridge. With the dawn, they were keeping cases on the Hobbled O, leaving their mounts concealed in the chaparral.

Every detail of Cherokee's ranch was clear as the rising sun dissolved the grey mist in the valley below. At least two dozen ponies drifted around a large corral and Tex counted eight saddles set on a pole rack beside the horse trough. Smoke curled out of the stovepipe chimney of a lean-to built against a rough board bunkhouse, from which men began to emerge, yawning and stretching. A squat, open-fronted shack he judged to be the blacksmith shop. That and a small barn comprised the balance of the buildings. All were weathered and in poor repair. The hard-beaten ground around the bunkhouse was littered with empty bottles and trash, and two grey old buzzards perched upon its eaves, preening. There was not a cow within sight.

"I've lamped better garbage dumps," murmured Peewee at his side.

Through the day, the two watchers lay beneath the torrid sun, grateful for the scant shade afforded by the greasewood over their heads and the canteens they had filled before leaving the valley. To all appearances Cherokee's crew had little

to do except kill time. Riders lounged around the buildings, hunkered in the shade, floated in and out of the bunkhouse.

When the shadows of the hills dropped across the valley, however, there were signs of activity. Half a dozen riders shook out their ropes and slipped between the corral rails. Dust rose thick as the remuda circled, the stamping, snorting ponies striving to escape the whirling loops. One by one, the riders emerged, leading their mounts.

"Busy night ahead," commented Peewee, as the two eyed the men below adjusting saddles and bridles.

"Let's go!" ejaculated Tex, squirming back through the low brush. Out of sight of the men in the valley below, he rose to his feet and beat the dust off his shirt and pants.

"Where you heading so gosh darned sudden?" inquired the stocky rider, rising beside him.

"The ford! Maybe we'll stick around here for days, waiting for that chuck to go out. If we dog them gents tonight, I gamble they'll lead us to the hideaway."

"Maybe they ain't using the ford tonight," objected Peewee.

"Wal, we ain't out any. We can get back here before sunup."

Clouds again obscured a thin segment of moon when the two riders tied their ponies beneath the willows of Rattlesnake Creek and hunkered beneath the gaunt cottonwood. For a while nothing broke the silence that dwelt over the darkened plain, but the distant howling of a coyote pack and the occasional roaring of a bull out on the flats. Then Tex sensed a tremor of sound from out of the night, nudged his pard and crushed his cigarette. In a few minutes the rumble of a moving herd, like the deep muffled roll of a drum, was plain.

The two riders dropped down into the cave behind the roots of the cottonwood. The thunder of the herd grew louder and, for the second time, Tex watched a dark mass of rustled Circle R cows pour across the ford. While the dust still hung above the water, the two eager watchers hit



for their ponies . . . bandanas pulled up over noses and mouths, they jogged along in the wake of the herd.

Ghostlike, a rider emerged from the dust of the drag. No more than a shadow in the gloom, he reined across their ponies' heads, "Git a wiggle on and push them cows along," he yelled hoarsely. "You got all day for sleeping."

Tex's hand dropped away from his gun butt and he spurred the buckskin. The form of the strange rider blended with the night and was gone.

"Pears we're invited to the party," chuckled Peewee.

Pushing the drag, the two whirled their ropes and chowd tiring steers. From time to time other riders appeared and as quickly disappeared into the dust-fog churned up by scores of sharp hooves.

Hour after hour, the bellowing, protesting herd was pushed through the night. Tex, cracking his rope and half-choked with dust, tried to figure their course, but found it impossible in the darkness. Vaguely, he was aware that they were moving in a wide half-circle and that the buckskin's shod hooves had long been ringing upon the rock of the Barrens.

Hills loomed ahead, black-etched against the night. The herd appeared to be heading into a solid rock wall. The leaders checked and the cows commenced to bunch. Tex circled, helping to hold the beef. Other riders passed and repassed. He saw that the herd was being fed into the narrow mouth of a canyon. Slowly it diminished in size and finally he tailed the column between rocky portals, into a wide canyon.

The trail led through chaparral, grey with dust. Tex pulled over beside Peewee, and raised his hand. No other riders were in sight. He reined off the trail and headed into the chaparral.

Threading through the clumped brush, he pushed ahead until sound of the herd died. Then he drew rein in the darkness.

"Maybe you'll tell me where we are," commented Peewee, pulling up to his stirrup.

"Sure," said Tex, "in Cherokee's hideout. Figure you could locate it again?"

"Maybeso, Bald Mesa lays due west."

Tex swung to the ground, handed his reins to the stocky puncher. Around him the mesquite grew shoulder high. "Stick around awhile," he directed, unstrapping his spurs. "I'm going to take a looksee."

Beyond the brush stretched a wide meadow, thick with grazing cows. To the right, a campfire flickered amid the trees. Tex worked around the fringe of the meadow, heading towards the campfire. As he drew closer, sliding cautiously from tree to tree, he glimpsed riders hunkered around the fire, which was set in a small clearing. Beyond them bunched the saddle horses, standing slack-hipped, with lowered heads. In front of a rude shack, a man with a dirty apron tied around his middle was ladling coffee out of a smoking pot. Men filled their mugs and dropped down by the fire.

The Texan ghosted around the clearing. Beyond it, tight-packed in a small fenced pasture, cows milled restlessly. This, he considered, was the herd he and Pee-wee had helped rustle, held close until their brands were changed. Then they would be thrown out upon the pasture and kept in the canyon until the blotched brands healed. He slipped through the brush, thin hereabouts, and again eyed the open pasture, trying to tally the number of cows scattered across it. There were maybe five—six hundred head, he figured, and chances were the tiny Teepee herd was lost among them.

He injuned back in the direction of the campfire again. Most of the riders were gathered around it now, smoking and talking after their long night's ride. Someone heaped brush on the glowing coals and it blazed high, bathing the clearing with bright light that played on the circle of hard faces beneath battered sombreros. Cherokee didn't seem to be around. The watching rider crouched lower as the firelight speared between the trees. If these hombres got wise that he and Pee-wee were in the canyon, he told himself wryly, their lives wouldn't be worth a beer check.

The shack was set to one side of the clearing and the fire threw a square shadow behind it. Tex eased towards the shadow. Covered by the shack, he could creep within hearing distance of the group at the fire. Maybe he might pick up something worth while.

He gained the shelter of the darkened area behind the shack and inched forward. His boot pressed on something that was soft and yielding. He stopped, bent down and fingered hair. The cook, after butchering a steer, had thrown the discarded hide behind the shack. On a hunch, Tex carefully rolled the hide and gathered it up, it was fresh and had scarcely commenced to stiffen. The rolled hide bulking under his left arm, he stole forward again, reached the back of the shack and groped along the peeled poles. At the angle of the building he stopped. To advance further would mean stepping out into the firelight. Head bent, he listened. Snatches of talk drifted to his ears, mainly rough banter between the rustlers. Then a loud remark hit his ears that tensed every muscle.

"Say, Jake, who was forking that bald-faced bay?"

"Ain't seen a bald-faced bay in the cavvy," came back a deep voice.

"Gordamn your peepers!" The other's voice rasped with irritation, "I lamped the horse plain, feller who straddled it was riding drag."

"Hell, Pecos, take a looksee at the horses yourself. I got a ten-spot that says you won't find a bald-faced bay among 'em."

Tex peered around the corner of the shack. A grey-shirted rider had left the fire. He waddled to the bunched saddle ponies and carefully looked them over. With quickened step, he came back. "Say, it ain't there!"

"You plumb certain you lamped a bald-face?" There was urgency in the voice of the rustler called Jake.

"I'd stake my life on it."

A quick, uneasy silence settled on the group around the campfire. Tex's scalp prickled as he remembered Peewee's bald-faced pony. Cautiously, he edged away from the shack.

The flow of loud-voiced talk among the rustlers had ceased. Several rose and moved around restlessly. Others gathered in a tight knot, in close confab.

Tex was still lurking in the thin brush behind the shack when he saw the riders who had trailed the herd break away and move quickly to their ponies. Before he reached the edge of the meadow they jogged towards the entrance of the canyon.

Mentally cursing the sharp eyes of the rustler known as Pecos, the Texan groped his way through the mesquite. The faint rattle of a bit-chain steered him to the spot where Pee-wee was waiting with the two ponies.

Quickly, he told of the rustlers' suspicions. "And we got to get out of here pronto," he concluded.

"The hide, too," inquired Pee-wee, wrinkling his nose, "It's a mite niffy!"

"I'm hoping that it'll put a rope around that doggoned Cherokee's neck," came back his pard. He tied the hide to his cantle and they cautiously walked the ponies through the brush towards the broad trail over which the herd had passed.

Without incident, they rode through the narrow rock entrance to the canyon, out upon a flat plain, boulder-littered and barren.

"Seems like we played out of luck," said Pee-wee, as they hit southward, across the flat. "How we gonna get our cows, if Cherokee's got them bottled up."

"Wal, we ain't altogether out of luck," consoled Tex. "If Cherokee had been around, he'd have bottled up that canyon pronto and combed every foot of it."

"Which would have made buzzard bait out of us."

"And if this hide which your delicate nose don't fancy carries the brand I hope it does, we'll lead the whole danged Circle R crew into that canyon, and maybe convince them that though a nester may be a first cousin to a skunk, he ain't always a rustler."

Sunlight gilded the ridges and the shadows were fleeing

from Hope Valley when they rode through the Notch. Bone-weary, they headed for the shack. Peewee yawned, and rasped his bristly jowls as he stripped the gear off his pony. "All I crave is shut-eye, and plenty of it," he declared.

But Tex was eagerly unrolling his hide. He spread it on the ground, dropped on his knees and examined the brand.

"Look at this!" he yelled triumphantly.

The chunky rider stepped close, and eyed the brand over the Texan's shoulder. At first glance it seemed the hide was plainly marked with Cherokee's brand—the Hobbled O. Two circles were joined by a short stroke. In the center of each circle was a small "c." But closer inspection revealed that it was a Circle R brand cleverly blotched. Another circle, of equal size to Rock's, had been seared on the hide and joined to the other by a short bar. The "R" was blurred into a "C" to correspond with another "C" in the added circle.

This job of brand-blotching was fresh, but when the scars healed, few would guess that the big Hobbled O was once a smaller Circle R.

"If it warn't loco, I'd say that Hobbled O iron was registered special to blotch Rock's cows," said Peewee, squinting at the altered brand.

"Maybe the idea ain't so loco," came back Tex. He rolled up the hide and set it again behind the cantle. "Guess I'll head for the Circle R. This is where we pay Cherokee back for grabbing our cows and clear our name."

"Want me to side you?"

"Nope, you hit your soogans. You'll be heading for the canyon again before sundown."

Limbs leaden with fatigue, the Texan headed his hock-scarred pony southward. Every hour wasted gave Cherokee that much more time to move the rustled stock out of the canyon. And Tex knew that the 'breed would move fast when he learned of the bald-faced pony that no one on the Hobbled O owned.

The sun was high when he sighted the Circle R bulking,

like a small town, on the bald plain. Tex tried to raise the wearied pony above its lagging jog trot in vain. He could have spurred it into a faster pace, but he hated to punish the blown and footsore buckskin.

This was his first glimpse of Rock's spread and he was amazed at its size. Drawing closer, he saw that the ranch house was a large rambling structure, set low to the ground of adobe construction. It was laid out in the form of a square, with a large, wholly enclosed, patio. The roof was flat and edged with a ridge that ran around the entire outside of the square. Perhaps two feet in height, the ridge was slitted at regular intervals. Like a fort, considered the Texan. Maybe that's what it was intended to be. When Rock ran his first herd there was no town at Skull Creek, and Apaches swept the range.

Back of the ranch house were grouped bunkhouse, barns, a dozen well-kept buildings, while a network of corrals lay to the side. Two windmills towered high on opposite sides of the spread and the metallic clank-clank-clank of the pumps, as the blades slowly turned; came to his ears.

He circled the house and rode into a yard, flanked by the bunkhouse on one side, a big barn on the other. At one end was a corral. By its gate a burly rider was tightening the cinch of a roan.

Tex checked the buckskin. His eyes searched around, but there was no one in sight. Reluctantly, he kneed the pony and walked it towards the rider by the corral—it was Bull Robertson, the last man on earth he wanted to meet at that time.

Bull straightened and turned at sound of the buckskins' hooves. His loose lips twisted with distaste as he eyed the jaded, sweat-stained pony and its unshaven, dust-grimed rider.

"The gun-toting nester!" he growled, in surprise. "Say, you got gall riding into the Circle R!"

"Forget it!" advised Tex wearily. He was ready to drop out of the saddle and his temper was thin-edged. "Sanders or Rock around?"

"I don't take backtalk from a saddle bum no time," barked Bull. "Least of all on my own spread." He raised his voice, roared, "Sam, Wyoming, Cassidy!" Men tumbled out of the barn. "Throw this bum off the Circle R!" yelled Bull. "The coyote gunned our boys in The Four Aces!"

Resentment, smouldering deep within the Texan, blazed into a flame of fury. So this was the thanks he got for jiggering his pony to side the Circle R. To hell with Rock he thought savagely.

Grabbing for their guns, the three waddies were running clumsily across the yard. Tex swung off his pony on the far side. Shielded by the buckskin's barrel from the advancing punchers, he whirled towards Bull, right hand darting to the butt of his six-gun. The holster swivelled.

"Reach!" he grated, "and call your dogs off—knot-head!"

Ludicrously, the beefy young heir to the Circle R elevated his arms, feet shuffling nervously, while he gaped appealingly at the punchers panting to his aid.

## CHAPTER 14

JAW working upon a chaw, Silent Sanders, the Circle R foreman, stepped out of the bunkhouse, evidently alerted by Bull's stentorian roar. For once, the poker-faced foreman was so surprised he almost swallowed his chaw. He saw Bull, arms wobbling, shoulder high, abashed by the threat of Tex's gun, the three men running across the yard, unlumbersome their hardware, and the tight-featured Texan.

Right hand exploring his own gun butt, Sanders stalked out into the sun glare. An urgent yell left his throat, "Hold it!"

Tex relaxed as the foreman's shadow fell across him. His hand dropped away from his iron, but his eyes still dwelt on Bull. "That big lunkhead," he thought, "is liable to pull a sneak draw." The punchers dropped to a relieved walk.

"What's the play?" demanded Silent. His long leathery form slipped between Tex and Bull Robertson.

"That hammerhead," came back Tex brittlely, "got no more brains than a frog has feathers."

"Chew it finer!"

"I wore the shoes off that buckskin, hell-bent to save maybe six-hundred of your cows." The Texan's voice was sharp with bitterness, "And that—scrub—craves to throw me out! Wal," he set foot in the oxbow stirrup, grabbed the horn to mount, "You don't have to throw me off this lousy spread, I'll ride off—and stay off."

Bony features expressionless, the foreman eyed the drawn, fatigue-stamped face of the unshaven rider and his pony, coat matted with sweat. Took in the cowhide lashed to the cante. It was plain the Texan was worn out, mentally and physically. Silent Sanders was more than just a tough cowman; it took brains as well as toughness to handle the big Circle R crew. He stepped forward and laid his hand on Tex's shirted shoulder. "Reckon Bull tangled his rope," he said quietly. "You're all frazzled out, Texan. Drop over to the cookhouse and I'll have the dough wrangler scare you up some good strong coffee."

It was quite a speech for Silent, but he sensed the trail-worn Texan had something on his mind of vital concern to the Circle R. That rolled hide had aroused his curiosity, too.

Tex hesitated, "I want to palaver with Rock!"

"Sure," soothed the foreman. "Just step over to the house."

Bull and the punchers had gathered close. "Say!" burst out the young cowman, "I don't see—"

"What you don't see don't count," cut in Silent. "Button up!"

He turned to Tex, "Let's ramble."

"I got to tote this along," said the Texan, and commenced unroping the rolled hide.

Rock Robertson, owner of the Circle R, had been described as "a rambunctious old moseyhorn, with more kick than a Missouri mule." Men said he had been addicted to the use of a running iron in his younger days, but not when he was



around. He was an alkalied old-timer who swore impartially at everyone on the Circle R crew—and they swore by him.

When Tex followed the foreman's long form through a rear door of the square adobe ranch house, down a cool corridor and into a small bare-walled office, he was prepared to meet a magnified version of the big-bodied Bull. To his astonishment, the grey-shirted cowman seated at an old roll-top desk was small framed and as spare of flesh as Silent Sanders.

At sound of his visitor's clinking spur chains, loud in the silent corridor, Rock swung around in his chair. "Holy rattle-snake's puppies!" he roared. "Do you have to bust in on a jasper when he's figuring how to squeeze out a few dollars for himself after supporting a useless bunch of saddle wallopers?"

Silent stepped aside and Tex met the scrutiny of flinty eyes, set in craggy features as seamed and sun-dried as old leather. Then the cold cowman's glance moved inquiringly to his foreman.

"Wal?" he ejaculated. Beneath a faded grey-white mustache his mouth reminded Tex of a bear-trap.

"Young feller we run off Rattlesnake," Silent jerked his head at the Texan. "He winged Swivel-Eye. Craves to palaver."

"Guns my rider, clubs my son, rustles my stock—and now he wants to palaver!" snapped Rock. "I'll palaver—with a gun!"

Tex tautened, shot a glance at Silent. The foreman dropped a slow eyelid. "He's got something—big, Rock!"

The grizzled old-timer reached out, twirled a straight-back chair around and set it before the harassed Texan, "Set down afore you drop, son." Then he jerked open a drawer of the desk, lifted out a bottle of Old Kentucky Dew, worried the cork free with yellowed teeth, and handed the bottle to his visitor.

"Varnish your tonsils, young fellow, then spill it," he invited.

Tex took a long pull at the bottle, sighed deeply, and took

another. With a sigh of satisfaction, he passed it back. He sure needed that drink!

Sparing words, but omitting nothing, he told of settling in Hope Valley, Cherokee's threats, the loss of his herd. Described how he and Peewee had kept cases on the Hobbled O, watched the crew ride out at sundown. Spoke of the watch at the ford, the stolen Circle R cows, the secret hide-away. "And," he concluded, "I ain't spilling this to save your cows, but I need your guns to save mine."

"Five—six hundred head," mused Silent. His eyes sought the cowman's. "Figgered there was a leak across Rattlesnake."

"Dammit!" snorted Rock. "Didn't we chase off the nesters to stop that leak? Don't you set night guards?"

"Sure, but we got quite a slug of range to cover."

"And you got a double-crosser in the crew," cut in the Texan. The pair of eyes focussed with bleak inquiry.

"Swivel-Eye! He rode with a bunch Cherokee run off a month back."

"I figgered that son was playing both ends against the middle," growled Silent.

"Take a gander at this." Tex unrolled the hide. He didn't have to explain the blotched brand. The story was plain to the cow-wise eyes of the intent men who leaned over to eye the rustler's work.

"And you got to hustle to save that beef," continued the Texan. "They know we're wise." He told of Peewee's bald-faced bay.

Rock looked at his foreman. "How many punchers we got around?"

"Can't gather more'n six—seven. We'll have two dozen come sundown."

"Gimme a fresh horse and I'll ride," put in Tex.

"Get every man in the saddle—pronto," rasped Rock. He banged down the slide, locking his desk. "And throw my hull on Commanche. While we set around chawing, that 'breed buzzard is cleaning out the canyon."

Daylight was fading when ten riders filed between the portals of the canyon that had been packed with rustled cows when Tex last rode out.

Peewee in the lead, they wound through the mesquite and rode out upon a broad pasture. But the canyon was empty. Not a cow grazed upon the flat expanse.

"That nester is running a sandy over you, paw!" announced Bull smugly.

"Lamp the sign!" said Silent laconically, indicating droppings and tracks thick upon the trampled ground.

"Like a blasted stockyard," grunted Rock in disgust. "The cow-hocked, sheep-herdin' coyotes sure made a jackass out of the Circle R!"

"But—" objected Bull.

"F'r Gawd's sake, keep your trap closed and quit dribbling!" roared his exasperated father.

Leaving the explosive old man to curse his crew, the rustlers and the cows with equal impartiality, Tex rode for the deserted shack. Behind it, he searched for more discarded hides, but Cherokee was too slick to leave more evidence lying around.

The bunch of Circle R riders drifted over, watered their ponies at a spring beyond the clearing, lit cigarettes and hunkered around in the shade while Rock and his foreman held a confab. Tex rode up. "Reckon we're late!"

"Way late," agreed Sanders.

Tex grinned crookedly. "You lost a few cows, but me and Peewee, we lost our whole damned herd."

"How many head?" snapped Rock.

"Forty two-year-olds and two bulls. First you burn us out, then Cherokee cleans us out!"

"Wal, do we brace the Hobbled O?" drawled Silent.

"You bet your boots we do!" grated the cowman.

"Cherokee got twelve riders, maybe more," said Tex, "tough hombres."

"I never was good at figgering odds," barked Rock. "Let's ride."

Stars sprinkled the heavens when a bunch of riders drifted across the flat below Cherokee's Hobbled O. At Sander's curt command, they fanned out as they neared the clutter of ragged buildings. As they moved close, Tex, in the center of the wide-spaced line of grim-faced men, was braced to throw himself off his pony and flatten on the rocky ground when gunfire licked out of the night. But no sound came from the darkened bunkhouse and no ponies drifted around the corral.

Alert for a trap, the Circle R punchers scattered, probing around in the gloom. Sanders stepped down and kicked open the bunkhouse door. He struck a match, picked up a discarded newspaper and rolled it into a makeshift torch. Tex stepped behind him. The blazing light revealed evidence of hasty flight. Several torn blankets lay crumbled upon empty bunks, oddments of saddlery were thrown on the floor, empty bottles and greasy cards littered the table . . . a red glow bathed the Circle R riders as tinder-dry timbers crackled and flames bit greedily into the ancient buildings.

It was close upon noon when Tex and Peewee rolled out of their bunks next day. The Texan scraped a three-day growth of beard from his chin. He was packing a bucket of water from the spring when movement in the Notch caught his eye. As he watched, with growing wonderment, a small herd of cows snaked down into the valley, two riders on their flanks. Peewee dashed out of the shack, "Hey, Tex!" he gasped, "Look at that! If it ain't our herd, I'm loco."

Together they eyed the cows moving slowly across the valley. A bull roared and the echoes muttered away into the hills. "We never owned a bull like that!" said Tex.

One puncher held the beef while another headed for the cabin, leading a buckskin pony. Then understanding came to the Texan. Rock had sent over a herd to replace theirs and maybe was giving them time to pay for it. He advanced to meet the Circle R rider.

"Compliments of Rock," drawled the puncher. He stepped down and fished a sheet of paper out of his jeans. Tex

smoothed it out. It was a bill of sale on forty two-year-olds and two bulls, signed by Rock Robertson.

"Say!" he spluttered, "Rock ain't GIVING me them cows!"

"Looks that way!" The puncher yawned and built a smoke. "The old man won't miss 'em. He ain't a bad old cuss, when you get to know him."

Again Tex eyed the cows, his thoughts still in a ferment. This was something he hadn't figured on.

He became aware that the puncher was still standing in front of him. "I guess Swivel-Eye's hunting another job," he commented, to make conversation.

"Wal." The rider ran his tongue along the wrapper of his half-made cigarette and studied it thoughtfully. "You might say that double-crossin' bustard has got another job—it's kinda sultry where he rides."

Deputy Sheriff Jim Jeffries crossed Main Street with the mail the bi-weekly stage had brought in the previous afternoon. He nursed a deep-seated suspicion that Mrs. Walkins, postmistress and wife of the storekeeper, fountainhead of feminine gossip in Skull Creek, always held it so that she could read the postcards and glance through the magazines. But what use, considered Jeffries, was suspicion without proof?

The sun had scarcely cleared the barrier of Sawteeth's rugged peaks, but the interior of the tin-roofed shack was already like an oven. The deputy tossed the mail onto his spur-scratched desk, opened the windows and wedged back the door. Then he hung his hat on a peg and dropped into a broad armchair, cushioned with a folded blanket. After rolling a smoke, he dug into the mail. Two "wanted" notices he scanned briefly and stuffed into a drawer; a bulky mail order catalog was carefully set aside for future perusal, a matrimonial circular he balled and threw at a crawling horse-fly. Saving the best until last, he finally unfolded the *Butte Bulletin* and settled down, with a grunt of satisfaction, to read.

Spurs jingled, and a broad-shouldered muscular rider darkened the doorway.

"Hell, this dump is as hot as a hornet's nest!" He pushed back his Stetson and dabbed a seamed forehead with a voluminous blue bandanna. Close-cropped, his grey hair stood up like a porcupine's quills. Thatched eyebrows met above deep-set, penetrating eyes. A neatly trimmed spade beard, stubbled with grey, failed to hide a heavy jaw. His open shirt revealed a chest matted with hair, and his short legs had the bow of the lifetime horseman.

Flint Fleeson was no man to fool with, reflected Jeffries, dropping his newspaper, but he never gave the law any trouble, stuck close to his horse ranch over the rim of the valley and tended strictly to his own business. What brought him to Skull Creek? Maybe the 'Paches had run off some of his horses. "Howdy, Fleeson!" he greeted. "Horse trouble?"

"Nope!" The horse breeder's words were clipped and his voice had the brusque quality of a man accustomed to giving orders—and seeing them obeyed. It took a tight rein to handle crazy bronco-busters, considered the deputy. Most of those hombres were as wild as the gut-twisters they broke.

"You got a line on Coyote's killer?" demanded Fleeson.

Jeffries masked his surprise. "You acquainted with Coyote?"

Flint shrugged. "In a way of speaking. The old horned toad used to drop in at the ranch regular on the way to town. I kind of miss him. And I don't like that torture deal."

"Me neither," agreed the deputy. "Mexicans, I guess."

"That Limejuicer—is he on the up-and-up?"

"Sure." Jeffries nodded decisively. "Coyote was dead maybe three—four days when he hit the gulch."

"That cat business sounded phony to me."

"Mike heard him make the deal with Coyote in The Four Aces."

"He wouldn't have cleaned out the cache?"

"What do you know about the cache?"

Fleeson grunted and jerked his head impatiently towards the *Butte Bulletin*. "I read."

"The sign says he didn't."

Obviously unsatisfied, the horse breeder turned towards the doorway, "Wal, that killing still don't set right."

Again Jeffries settled down to read his paper. Once more the doorway was shadowed. With a sigh of resignation, the deputy set the crackling pages down. Yesterday, when he had nothing to read but the yellowed "Wanted Notices" pinned on the walls, no one came near the shack from dawn to dusk. Today, with the weekly newspaper fresh to hand and a fat mail-order catalog promising absorbing hours, it seemed the whole danged town was calling.

A trifle impatiently, his head came up and he eyed a monk-faced man in sober townsman's attire. The stranger dipped into a pocket of his vest and produced a white card. With a flourish, he handed it to the fuming lawman. Jeffries read:

**PETE POWERS**

*Photographer*

HIGH QUALITY — LOW PRICE

WEDDING PARTIES A SPECIALTY

"Nope," he announced firmly, passing the card back. "I ain't got no wife, there ain't no loving relatives and I don't crave to look at myself."

The photographer fished two glass daguerreotypes, backed with black paper and set in neat wooden frames, from another pocket. "Perhaps," he suggested, "you would be interested at these samples of my work."

"Nope!" yawned the deputy. "Now get! I got to ketch up on my reading."

"Or this?" persisted the visitor blandly, and held a small metal shield, cradled in the palm of his left hand, before Jeffries' eyes.

The deputy blinked with surprise as he read the inscription:

**P. W. POWERS**

# 7046

Special Investigator

Wells Fargo Express Co.

He straightened abruptly in his chair, "Goshdarnit!" he gulped. "What brought you to Skull Creek?"

## CHAPTER 15

WITHOUT a word, the pseudo-photographer produced a "Wanted Notice," old and faded. Carefully, he smoothed out its stiff creases, and set it before the deputy. "Can you identify that man?" he asked.

Curiously, Jeffries eyed the browning ink. There was no mistaking the wizened features and close-set eyes. "Jumping jack rabbits!" he exclaimed. "It's Coyote Cal!" His eyes dropped lower and he read:

### \$1,000 REWARD

Wanted — For Armed Robbery

WILLIAM CARSON, alias SLICK SAM, Height 5' 10"  
Weight about 160 lb. Hair, brown. Thin features; eyes close-set. Member of notorious Darnell gang. Wanted for robbery with violence. Implicated in holdup of Layton County Bank, Smoke City Bank, National Bank of Walker; also theft of bullion from Wells Fargo Co., which offers 25% of value for recovery of loot.

WILLIAM HANLEY  
Sheriff  
Walker County, Texas.

Powers hooked up a chair, sank down upon it and stuffed the bowl of a briar. "Surprised?" he inquired, humor in his shrewd eyes.

"I feel like a mule kicked me—with all four feet," confessed the deputy.

"Well, you passed up an easy bounty, a thousand cart-wheels, and that's not figuring a quarter of the loot." The Wells Fargo man held a match to his pipe, loosened his vest and relaxed. Jeffries pulled out his corncob.

"This case goes back for years," explained the detective.



"Jules Darnell led a gang of four hard cases. They cut quite a swath through Texas. Hanley, with a posse, cornered them at last in a shack on the Pecos, where they were hiding out. The posse surrounded the joint, made a sieve out of it and beefed three of the gang. Darnell was wounded—bad—but Carson got him away across the river, after dark. There wasn't a dollar in the shack. The loot was cached—somewhere—maybe \$200,000 in gold. The gang never fooled with paper money. Well, we figure Darnell died later. The boys trailed plenty blood through the brush. But Carson grabbed a couple of horses and the pair vanished complete. Seemed like the gold was a goner. The case died a natural death." He tapped the dottle out of his pipe. Jeffries discovered that he had been chewing the stem of the unlit corncob and struck a match.

"Wal?" he prompted.

"Now and then an old case rattles its bones and comes to life. Two things happened last month. First, the manager of a bank in Butte City reported a puncher banked six thousand gold in old Wells Fargo pouches, and then we got the report of the Ghost Gulch killing. At first they didn't seem to tie in. Wells Fargo put me on the case and I poked around." He leaned forward, his pipe stem pointing. "Did Coyote ever ship any ore?"

"None from Skull Creek, maybe from Mineral."

"Not on your life! The lobo never had a mine, that's why. That Ghost Gulch layout was a blind. Coyote cached the loot in the gulch and lay low. Maybe he figured some day to make a big splash. But he didn't live to see that day. A jasper knifed him, cleaned out the cache and was crazy enough to bank six thousand." Powers held out a glass-faced photograph. "Acquainted with this gent?"

Jeffries eagerly examined the picture. "It's a spittin' image of Tex Taylor," he concluded. "A nester the Circle R run off Rattlesnake."

"Well, I want to swear out a murder warrant against Taylor, and I'll ride with you when you serve it."

"Tex Taylor!" The Deputy shook his head. "You're barking up the wrong tree. Taylor's no knifer."

Powers had his pipe going again, but moisture glistened upon his smooth face. "Say," he suggested, eyeing the metal roof overhead through a cloud of flies, "let's hash this over in the saloon, this joint's hotter than the inside of a red-hot stove."

"I don't lubricate this early," objected Jeffries, "but we can palaver over a pot of dip in the Good Eats. They got fly curtains."

"Anywhere but here," agreed the Wells Fargo man, slapping at a fly on his neck. "Hell won't bother you any."

The Wells Fargo man was talking again. "How did Taylor get his pouches if he didn't clean out the cache? He put up a yarn at the bank that he'd sold a ranch in Texas and packed the gold in his saddlebags. Now, no bank pays out dinero in Wells Fargo pouches. And that type of pouch hasn't been in circulation for eight—ten years. Hell, feller, it's as plain as that coffee urn yonder—Taylor killed Coyote and cleaned out the cache. I gamble the gold is planted somewhere around that shack he and that other cowpoke built in the north end of the valley."

Jeffries nodded, with reluctant admission of a man convinced against his will. "Two sets of prints," he muttered, "riding boots."

"Ties in perfect, doesn't it?"

"Yep. I guess we ride out and rope the lobo. Maybe we should corral the pair of them."

"No," said Powers sharply. "We've got no evidence against the little feller. Pick up Taylor and I'll keep cases on the other bird. Chances are he'll get cold feet and light out with the gold. I'll be right there to grab him. That's all I'm interested in—the loot."

"They'll hang."

"That's your business," returned Powers indifferently. "If I can recover the gold I don't give a damn what you do with them. And you still got a chance to rake in the jackpot,

mister. A quarter share of two hundred thousand isn't to be sneezed at."

"Hell, if I lamped that amount of dinero, in one spot, I'd drop dead," declared Jeffries. He rose. "Wal, I got to get down to the smithy and see if Judkens is through plating my pony. See you in the office."

An affrighted girl, knuckles white as she clenched the table edge, watched the two men brush aside the fly-curtains and step out on the plankwalk. Rigidly she rose, brain seething. Tex Taylor a cowardly knifer! It just couldn't be true, she told herself fiercely. Tex wouldn't do a thing like that. Then she thought of the money he'd spent on the new spread. He claimed he'd had it in the bank all along, but when he was homesteading on Rattlesnake he had told her every dollar he had was sunk in his holding. Why did he lie? There was something wrong, terribly wrong. And Jeffries was going to ride out and arrest him for murder!

Abruptly she made her decision. Untying her apron as she hastened back to the kitchen, she burst in upon portly Hans Wurd, enveloped in steam as he scrubbed pots and pans at the sink beyond the heavy stove.

"Hans, I've got to go—quickly!" The words gushed from her white lips.

"You can't quit me like this, Miss Margery!" expostulated the perspiring cook. "The odder girls they gif me notice, a week maybe. But you—you gif me one minute." He peered suspiciously into the empty restaurant. "Where iss the man—the horse thief! What iss this—a shot-gun marriage?"

Despite her anxiety, the girl could not repress a smile at the alarm in the fat man's voice and the panic stamped upon his broad, good-humored face. "I'm not quitting, Hans. I—I just have to go, right now!"

Bewildered, Hans absent-mindedly picked up a wet dish rag and mopped his damp forehead. Margery whirled and flew down the restaurant like a miniature tornado.

Hans continued to mop his face with the wet cloth, oblivious

of the dirty water that channelled down to his jowls. Events were moving too fast for his slow-moving mind to grasp.

Bill Yeager, the liveryman, clumped into the restaurant. "Howdy," he grunted, sliding onto a stool. "Gimme a stack of flapjacks and lasses."

Margery Lawson flew along the plankwalk like a scared fawn, heading for the livery barn, at the south end of Main Street. Nearing the barn, she glimpsed her old cow pony, peacefully drowsing in the corral, head down and ears drooping. Then her brain began to function again. She was not dressed for riding and even if she were, the ancient cow pony would never reach Tex's spread before the well-mounted deputy. Further, she was hazy as to the location of the Teepee. Seven miles north of Rattlesnake Creek, Peewee had said. Rattlesnake looped halfway across the valley. It might take her all day, or longer to find it.

In an agony of doubt, she stopped midway down the big barn, and almost stamped with angry impotence. She must get word to Tex. No one else could save him.

The quick tap-tap-tap of feet on the loose planks of the barn behind reached her ears. She swung around—and faced Juanita Silva, faultlessly garbed in a tailormade riding habit, a smart Stetson atop her raven hair. From one hand dangled a pair of soft leather gloves; a plaited quirt was looped around her waist.

With mutual hostility, both girls stiffened. Then Margery remembered the fast-stepping palomino. This girl was a friend of Tex's. Impulsively, she stepped towards the other, hands outstretched, "Will you please help me?"

Disdain mingled with mockery in Juanita's dark eyes. "Why should I?" she inquired coolly.

"Tex's life is at stake!"

Quick interest lighted the other's pale features. "He who shoots like the lightning, yes?"

"Jim Jeffries, the deputy sheriff, is riding out to arrest him for murder!"

Juanita's slim shoulders raised. "So! Ees it my business?"

"You're his friend—warn him!"

Dull red stained Juanita Silva's olive cheeks. Then she flung away, reached for her saddle, racked by the palomino's stall.

Triumph in her eyes, Margery Lawson stood back against the wall and watched the Silva girl swiftly cinch on the saddle and slip in the bit. Lips a thin line, Juanita swung lightly up on the big palomino, wheeled it out of the stall.

"He's at the Teepee in Hope Valley, seven miles north of Rattlesnake!" cried Margery.

Juanita's quirt stung the rump of the palomino. Its hooves rumbled upon the plank floor and it shot out into the street.

Five minutes later Margery walked calmly into the restaurant. Bill Yeager was demolishing a stack of flapjacks. She rounded the end of the counter, picked up her apron, set it around her trim waist and tied the strings.

Hans Wurd thrust his head through the square aperture and gaped at her like a newly-landed codfish.

"Well, Hans," she said with a smile, "I'm back!"

The fat cook gulped spasmodically, then turned piteously to Yeager, "See what I mean—you just can't figure 'em."

"Don't try," advised the liveryman. "Gimme another coffee."

Tex and Peewee were stringing three strands of wire upon their newly-set fence posts when the distant drumming of a fast pony's hooves caught their ears. Between the scattered oaks they glimpsed a palomino, stretched at full gallop, hurtling towards them. A dark-haired girl rode it with effortless grace.

"The Silva gal!" ejaculated Peewee. "What's she doing out here?"

Tex eyed the racing pony with furrowed brow. He hadn't seen Juanita since the morning he had ridden with her.

She curbed the foam-flecked lathered pony harshly and balanced easily as it rose high upon its hind legs.

Tex stepped forward when it came down, grabbed the head-

stall and ran his hand down the sleek neck. It came away wet.

"Did you have to jigger him, ma'am?" he inquired, with disapproval.

"You mind your own beeziness!" she snapped. "I ride heem hard to save you—like a beeg fool!"

"Save me?"

"The sheriff—he ride out to arrest you, for murder."

"Say, you funning?" Tex frowned up at her.

"I was never less funnee in my life!" With that, she wheeled the palomino, spurred it ruthlessly and shot away.

Tex turned to Peewee. "Wal, what do you make of that?"

The chunky puncher grinned wryly. "The Dude's been running off at the mouth. Jeffries got wise and he's coming awhooping!"

Tex bit his lip, frowning at the dust plume that trailed Juanita Silva up the valley. "Guess I'm through," he said tightly. "That lid puts a rope around my neck."

"Hell, you didn't beef the old carrion crow!" expostulated Peewee.

"Can I prove it?"

"Maybe you won't have to—when they ketch up with the real killer."

"When they string me up, they won't look any further," declared Tex grimly.

"Wal, you beat it—pronto," advised Peewee. "There's more dust rising around the Notch."

## CHAPTER 16

WHEN the grizzled Jeffries and the smoothed-faced Wells Fargo detective pulled rein at the shack, Peewee was hunched on the bench outside, artlessly eyeing the wisp of smoke that coiled from his cigarette. "Howdy, gents," he hailed cheerfully. "Light and cool yore saddles."

The two men stepped down. Jeffries looked around casually, but his faded blue eyes missed nothing. They took in the solitary pony in the corral, as much of the interior of the shack

as was visible through the open door, then lifted to the hills, seeking telltale dust stirred by a fleeing rider.

"Tex Taylor around?" he inquired, well knowing the answer.

"Nope, we kinda split up," drawled Peewee. "You might find him around Butte City, then again, you might not."

"That's why there's two mugs on the table inside," came back the deputy acridly. "Both used recent."

The squat puncher inwardly cursed his carelessness and thought fast. "Old pard rode in," he responded carelessly. "We split a pot of dip."

"A gal?"

So they sighted the Silva girl, speculated Peewee. No sense in covering up. "Yep," he grinned.

Jeffries eyed him quizzically from beneath shaggy eyebrows. "How long you been pards with Juanita Silva?"

Unexpectedly, the homely puncher broke into verse:

"A horse may be homely as your old lid,  
You can't tell his speed from his hide;  
There's lotsa things that may be hid  
But—yippee—just take a ride!"

Powers dipped some cool water from the olla. He choked on his drink, swung around and eyed the chunky rider with surprise.

"That ain't nothing," Peewee smiled with complacent satisfaction. "I'm a regular poet. Got most of them word-wranglers beat by a head. I rhymes 'em every time! Listen!

"I am a lonesome cowpoke  
I wander o'er the range  
I may——"

"Aw, button up!" advised Jeffries impatiently.

"There's twelve verses," came back the rider, his tone aggrieved, "but nobody will listen."

"That gal warned Taylor and he beat it!"

"Didn't I tell you—" began Peewee resignedly.

"Yep—you told us. When was you in Ghost Gulch last?"

"Mebbe two years back."

"Another windy!" barked Jeffries.

Peewee raised his broad shoulders, in rising irritation. "Well, I guess I'll button up. You gents don't believe nothing, no-how."

The deputy stepped inside the shack. He eyed the two bunks, with rolled soogans, a war sack sagging beside each. There was little else, outside of the rude table, box chairs, cooking utensils and articles of clothing and saddlery hanging from nails. The floor was hard-packed earth, clean-swept. There was no two hundred thousand gold buried here.

It was plain Peewee was lying about his partner; the Texan had moved out so fast he'd left his bedroll.

"Let's go," said Jeffries curtly to Powers, stepping outside again. To Peewee tartly, "I've a mind to set you in the cooler a while. Maybe you'd give us a straight story."

"About what?" asked the chunky puncher innocently.

Jeffries snorted and gathered his reins.

Peewee traced the twin dust plumes up valley until they settled beyond the Notch, then he rounded the shack and released a shrill "Yippee!"

After a while Tex emerged, pushing through the aspen thicket that choked the draw, leading his saddled pony. "They beat it?" he inquired.

"Sure! But Jeffries smells a skunk. That old wart hog is liable to keep cases on the spread. You best vamoose—pronto."

The Texan rasped his chin, cogitating. "Maybe I should hide out in the Barrens a while," he decided.

"Cherokee's canyon's a likely spot," offered Peewee. "Good graze and water. I reckon the 'breed don't hanker to use it no more. I could ride out with chuck occasional."

"Yep." Tex headed for the shack, rolled and roped his soogans and tied them behind the cantle. Meanwhile, his pard threw food and cooking utensils into a gunny sack . . . a lone, chunky figure, he stood by the shack and watched the Texan jog northward, fade into the hills.



In no good humor, the two lawmen followed the curves of Rattlesnake Creek, heading for the stage road, grateful for the shade of the willows.

"How come that girl got wise?" inquired the Wells Fargo man.

Jeffries grunted his disgust. "We was too free with talk in the Good Eats. That waitress was once a neighbor of the Texan's and nesters stick together like glue. She tipped off the Silva gal. Ain't nothing in the valley can match that palomino for speed. Wal," he concluded with meager consolation, "the jasper's got to eat. We'll keep cases on the spread and I'll broadcast a description."

For a while they jogged along in silence. Without warning, the deputy checked his pony, held up a cautioning hand. Powers reined in, shot a questioning glance at his companion. Then his gaze followed the direction of Jeffries' pointing finger. Almost wholly concealed in the chaparral, a piebald pony was standing, ground-hitched.

"Taylor?" There was excitement in the detective's low-voiced query.

"Maybe! He forked a buckskin, but he could have switched."

They drifted up to the saddled pony. Gesturing Powers to remain, the deputy slid silently out of the saddle, moved stealthily through the brush towards the nearby bank of the creek.

A red-shirted rider, screened by the drooping branches of a willow, was intently studying the sweep of Circle R range beyond the creek through a spyglass. A twig snapped as the deputy eased closer. In a flash Cherokee dropped his spyglass, swivelled, grabbing for his gun.

"Hold it!" barked Jeffries, his own six-gun levelled.

"You keep your trigger finger well greased," he commented testily, stepping close.

The 'breed cowman grunted, eying the lawman closely, plainly ill at ease.

Jeffries was well acquainted with the trouble between Rock Robertson and the Hobbled O, but from past experience, he

knew the cowmen were able to handle their own whittle-whanging and didn't stomach interference by the law.

"I ain't on the peck," he assured the hawk-nosed Cherokee, with a bleak grin, "I'm trailing Tex Taylor."

"Taylor!" the 'breed's taut alertness had slackened now. There was wonder in his deep voice. "Trouble?"

"Yep, big trouble—he murdered Coyote Cal."

Together, they moved back to the ponies.

"This gent," the deputy told Powers, "rods the Hobbled O." His lips twisted. "He locks horns occasional with the Circle R."

The Wells Fargo man eyed the dark-featured Cherokee with interest. "He know this country?"

Jeffries chuckled. "Blindfold."

The detective addressed Cherokee, "Want to pick up an easy thousand?"

"Dollars?"

"Hard money."

"You bet yore life!" the 'breed assured him fervently.

"Deliver Tex Taylor!"

A smile of satisfaction flitted across Cherokee's dusky features. "Dead or alive?" he grated.

"Alive!" said Powers emphatically. "He isn't worth a dollar to Wells Fargo dead."

"He was around his spread recent," put in Jeffries. "High-tailed for the Barrens, I guess, to beat the warrant. Figure you can round him up?"

Cherokee bared his teeth in a grin that held no humor. "If the sign is fresh," he promised. "I'll pack the lobo into Skull Creek—pronto."

"Alive!" cautioned Powers.

"There ain't no peace for the wicked," groaned Peewee. Shoving a brass shell, loaded with buckshot in each chamber of the 10-gauge shotgun, he peered out of the shack window.

Four riders were approaching across the valley and Peewee knew the red-shirted leader only too well.

Cherokee, tailed by another 'breed with greasy hair trailing

down over his shirt collar and moccasins on his feet, and two punchers, drew rein well beyond shotgun range. The four bunched. Then the moccasined 'breed thumped the barrel of the fuzztail he forked. With puzzled eyes, Peewee watched him pull away, skirting the corral. Understanding hit the squat puncher, as he saw the copper-faced rider, bent low in the saddle, slowly circle, scrutinizing the hard-baked ground.

"A 'breed tracker," he muttered, with sudden apprehension. "How in hell did Jeffries come to ring them buzzards into this deal?"

The tracker passed beyond his field of view. Undecided, Peewee eyed his Winchester, leaning in a corner. He could reach Cherokee and his two riders with that. But if he started trouble, the Hobbled O bunch could clean him out as easily as eating striped candy, he told himself ruefully. Singlehanded, he didn't have any more chance than a snowball in hell. And starting trouble wouldn't help Tex any.

Apparently responding to a signal, Cherokee heeled the piebald and followed the two riders, moving northward, out of sight.

Peewee waited a while, then cautiously let down the bar across the door and peeked out. The four riders were strung up valley, moving slowly northward, it was plain that they had hit Tex's trail and were dogging him, like lobos on the scent.

It would take a danged good tracker to follow a trail across the rocks of the Barrens, considered the squat rider philosophically, and Tex was no slouch at covering up his tracks. Odds' were that the sign would peter out in the rim of the valley. And they'd sure never hunt Tex in their own hideaway. Seemed he should haze their herd back on to Circle R range. Now that those wolves were on the prowl and Tex on the edge, their cows were about as safe in Hope Valley as they would be in a slaughterhouse. It might be a good idea to push the beef down the valley, save time at sunup. With these thoughts in mind, he threw the saddle across his bay and jogged across the flat.

The sun had long dropped behind the Black Kaweahs when

he pulled back. He hobbled the pony and headed for the shack, thoughts on supper. It was dark inside. He crossed the beaten earth floor, fumbled for the stable lantern on a shelf, levered up the glass funnel and scraped a stinker down the wall.

Lighted lamp in hand, he turned—to stare into the muzzle of a Colt, held by a man with hair like a porcupine's quills, who had been sitting quietly on a box behind the door, watching every movement.

"Set that lamp on the table," ordered the interloper curtly.

"Sure—sure," stammered Peewee. "Ain't you Fleeson, the horse breeder? What in he—"

"Quit dribbling, I'll ask the questions," snapped Fleeson. "Stretch!"

In comic perplexity, Peewee raised his hands shoulder high.

"Where's the Texan?"

"He beat it," returned Peewee promptly.

"Dodging the warrant?"

The squat rider nodded.

"So you two rattlesnakes knifed Coyote—for his gold?"

"You're a doggoned liar!" came back Peewee heatedly.

"And that's how you lousy rawhidiers gathered the dinero to start this spread." Cold rage laced the horse-breeder's accusation.

Peewee eyed the flinthard, deepset eyes behind the levelled gun. Sweat began to dampen his forehead. His visitor was in an ugly mood, and the gun was cocked.

"See here, Fleeson," he expostulated. "Tex never beefed the old wart hog and we never got his dinero."

"That why you're sweating blood?" came back the other. His voice had an edge like a knife. "Get this, runt! Coyote was my pard. I'm collecting his stake, then I'm taking you to town. Maybe you can talk a jury out of a stiff rope and a short drop, maybe not. Where's the cache? Start talking!"

Peewee, his brain whirling, stood with upraised hands, vainly trying to marshal his thoughts and devise a means of placating this grim-visaged accuser.

"Talk!" repeated Fleeson. His gun barrel slanted upwards.

"You're loco, mister!" The stocky puncher's voice was husky with strain. "I was hitting up the Lazy S for a job when Coyote kicked out, and Tex, he busted a gut trying to save the old coot's life."

The gun roared. Peewee flinched as the slug gouged the lobe of his right ear. He heard a flat slap as it hit the wall behind him.

"Loosen up." Pitiless, Fleeson's harsh voice came through the swirling gunsmoke, "or you'll get it dead center!"

A dull resignation, born of hopelessness, settled on the nester. "Go ahead and shoot!" he challenged wearily. "I swear on a stack of Bibles I done told the truth." His arms dropped. Listlessly, he waited for the hammering impact of another slug.

No shot came. His eyes raised to meet Fleeson's penetrating scrutiny. For moments the horse-breeder eyed him.

"I never seen the cache," he reiterated. Another shot burnt his left ear.

"Will the Lazy S back your claim?" demanded Fleeson finally.

"Sure."

"By Gawd, I think you're telling a straight story," murmured Fleeson. Still covering Peewee, he rose and moved crabwise towards the door. When the squat rider looked around, his deadly visitor was gone. Peewee's knees wobbled. He weaved towards the nearest chair, flopped onto it and sat sprawled, limp as a wet rag. Drops of blood from his damaged ear pattered softly to the floor. First the lawmen, then Cherokee, now Fleeson—it was too much for one day!

## CHAPTER 17

SHADOWS shrouded the Barrens when Tex headed his wearied pony into the rustlers' abandoned hideout. It was as deserted as when he had ridden in with the Circle R crew. He rode across the empty stretch of pasture, watered the buckskin and stripped off its gear, then hobbled the pony and let it drift. Likely he would be in the canyon for weeks. It was

a sure thing that no one could have dogged him. Before leaving ground that would take tracks, he had swung south, to give the impression he was heading for the Border. Then he had doubled back, across the wind-scoured, rock-cruste'd Barrens, where the pony's hooves left no sign that a man could read.

Well content, he made a fire and set his coffeepot to boil. Took a look into the shack and decided to spread his bedroll beneath the trees. Later, as night thickened, he rolled a smoke and leaned back comfortably against his saddle, watching the dancing flames. Mighty lucky to locate this spot, he reflected. Plenty shade, plenty water and plenty well hidden. It was made to order. Out on the Barrens he would have tough going, blasted with heat, no water except the little he could pack, compelled to keep eternally on the dodge. In this hideaway he could sit pretty for weeks, months.

His thoughts turned to Margery Lawson, and they were not pleasant. Word would fly around the valley that he was Coyote's killer. Margery—everyone—would have him pegged as a yeller knifer. Chances were that the real killer had disappeared for keeps. If the Apaches hadn't lifted the lobo's hair, he was probably on the safe side of the Border, wallowing in velvet. With Coyote's gold, he sure wouldn't stick around and take the chance of a rope.

He should have turned in the gold to Jim Jeffries, reflected the rider, with moody regret. It had brought death to Coyote and it would likely bring death to him. Now he was branded a murderer, with no possibility of proving his innocence. The law never slept. From now on they'd hunt him down like a mad dog. He'd be on the dodge until his dying day. He crushed his cigarette butt with gloomy resignation. It was too late for regrets now. He'd have to play the hand out.

Even though his brain was busy, the Texan's senses were acute. Beyond the wavering circle of firelight, the buckskin cropped steadily in the darkness, breaking off occasionally as it thudded awkwardly on hobbled forelegs to a fresh patch of grass. Of a sudden, Tex was conscious that it was cropping no longer. In an instant he was up on his feet, moving hastily

towards the animal. Head upraised, nostrils flared, it faced down canyon.

For minutes, the Texan stood motionless beside the pony, searching the night. But nothing moved in the void of darkness and no sound came to the watcher's ears save the chitter of a circling night hawk. The buckskin dropped its head and began to graze again. Chances were, thought Tex, that it had scented bear or a mountain lion. He returned to the fire, stirred it up and slid down against the curve of his saddle again. Half-dozing he watched the ever-changing flames, too lazily comfortable to roll another smoke.

A shadow, darker than its surroundings, moved on the further side of the fire. Tex straightened in quick alarm, right hand stabbing for his holster. Then he froze as the cold muzzle of a gun pressed hard against the back of his neck and a deep voice rasped, "Stretch, Texan!"

Slowly his hands came up. He knew that voice—Cherokee's. The forms of three men, each with ready gun, ghosted into the flickering firelight. They were taking no chances, thought Tex . . . something crashed down upon his head with a sledgehammer blow, white lights flashed before his eyes. He dropped like a pole-axed steer as his senses blacked out.

Cherokee eyed the limp form sprawled beside the saddle, and tossed a rounded rock aside. "I owed the bustard that one," he grunted with satisfaction.

When perception filtered through the Texan's numb brain, he was lying by the campfire, which now blazed high. Cherokee and three riders hunkered around it. Still bemused, Tex moved his head and groaned with agony at the searing pain. Eyes closed, he lay inert, striving to clarify his clouded brain. Gradually memory returned—the shadow beyond the fire, the gun at his neck, Cherokee's harsh voice, the stunning blow.

The men hunched at the fire, sucking stolidly on their cigarettes, paid the Texan little attention as he writhed back to consciousness. He tried to sit up and became aware of the gnawing bite of rawhide around his wrists. His legs, too, were

tightly lashed. At last, despite his bonds, he levered himself to a sitting position against the saddle.

"How come you conked me?" he demanded, voice hoarse.

Cherokee hunkered at arm's length, turned and regarded his prisoner with the nearest approach to humor Tex had ever seen in his smouldering eyes. "'Member standing us off? I guess you had that conk coming."

The Texan was still puzzled. Why had Cherokee and his men ridden into the canyon? Seemed as though he had played out of luck and the rustlers were using the hideout for stolen stock again.

"That sticky rope of yours will hang you up to dry before Rock gets through," he taunted.

"Sticky rope!" Cherokee chuckled deep in his throat, addressed his companions. "Get that, boys? He claims we're swinging a wide loop. Next he'll have us believe he rode up here for his health, not to dodge a murder warrant! Hell, Texan, we're rodding the law."

Tex strove to spur his brain to function against the pain that racked his head. "Rodding the law," he jibed, "dodging the law, likely."

The 'breed eyed him imperturbably. "If I warn't deputized, you'd be cold meat right now. Jeffries craves to stretch your neck legal." He expectorated regretfully into the fire, "You'd pack better dead, but I guess a feller can't have everything."

After a while, Tex fired another question. He still couldn't get things straight in his mind. "How come you rode into the canyon?"

"Just a hunch," admitted Cherokee. "I play my hunches! Wolfgang yonder followed your sign south—as far as it went. Wal, I wasn't foaled yesterday. I figured you'd swung back north—and where would you find a better hideout—and water—than this canyon?"

So just fool luck had beaten him, considered the Texan. All the trouble he'd taken to cover his trail went for nothing. Cherokee's hunch had made a jackass out of him.



"Gimme a drink," he said aloud. "I'm burning up, that crack most busted my skull."

Cherokee's spell of good humor had passed. "Plug your talk box," he advised surlily, "or I'll bend a barrel on the other side of your conk. When I deliver you to Skull Creek you'll have just enough life in your carcass to earn that thousand, and not a mite more. Speaking personal, I'd sooner deliver you dead."

Tex wasted no more words. Prey to bitter thoughts, he lay back against the saddle, while the fire guttered down and his captors gazed blank-eyed at the dying flames. Finally, they rolled up in their blankets and stretched out, feet to the reddening embers.

In silent desperation the Texan twisted his wrists, tight lashed behind him, striving to wriggle out of his bonds. But the job of trussing him up had been done by an expert. The more he wrenched and strained, the deeper the rough rawhide cut into his flesh. At last, the blood from his lacerated wrists ran warm over his hands, and he was compelled to quit.

Through the night, the prisoner dosed fitfully. He was wide awake, his cramped limbs chilled and head heavy with pain, when dawn greyed the canyon. The forms bulked around the dead fire stirred, struggled to their feet and moved drowsily in the dim light. It would be better, thought Tex, with leaded heart, if he were dead, too.

Cherokee and his renegades boiled his coffee for breakfast, and ate his chuck, but they gave him none. Then, as the light grew stronger, they saddled their ponies.

They removed the lashings from his legs to set him on the buckskin, hauled him to his feet and propelled him roughly in the direction of the saddled pony. His numbed legs refused to carry his weight. Hands still secured behind him, he crashed down upon his face. At Cherokee's curt order, two riders packed him like a sack of oats and set him across the buckskin. Blood seeped through his damaged nose and pistons pounded madly in his head.

It was close upon eleven by the tinny alarm clock that was set on a bracket above Hans Wurd's cook stove. Breakfast was over and forgotten. Margery Lawson stood by the restaurant window, gazing out upon the sun-swept street. Dishes were washed, booths tidied, she was glad of the brief mid-morning respite.

Her eyes dilated with horror and the strangled cry that tore from her throat brought the fleshy cook panting from the kitchen.

"What iss it?" he gasped.

The girl could only point wordlessly.

A slow procession stirred the dust of Main Street. Cherokee was playing an unusual role—siding the law—and he was determined to make the most of it. He rode ahead, the piebald reined down to a slow walk, triumph sparkling in his dark eyes. Behind him, the figure of a man in a dust-grimed hickory shirt swayed drunkenly in the saddle, held erect only by the wrists lashed to the horn and a rope taut from ankle to ankle, looped beneath the pony's barrel. His Stetson sat askew upon disordered hair. The lower part of his face was a smear of dry blood and a thickened tongue protruded from between his cracked puffed lips. He stared unseeingly, like a blind man, through glazed bloodshot eyes.

At the buckskin's tail rode a 'breed, features 'blank. Two hard-faced riders brought up the rear.

The horses drifted past and Margery came to life, "It's—it's Tex!" she whispered.

"He don't look so good to me," responded Hans dubiously.

"Good!" She was not whispering now. "They're killing him—the brutes!" Eyes blazing, she pushed past the amazed Hans and rushed out of the restaurant.

Two men were packing the Texan's semi-conscious form into the law shack when Margery Lawson whirled down the plankwalk.

Jeffries rose from his desk, disapproval in his eyes, as they dumped the dust-coated, sagging form on the plank floor.

Cherokee stepped over the body, "Wal, I delivered the bastard!"

Jeffries eyed the crumbled form. "Alive?" His voice was brittle.

"Sure, there's plenty of life in his carcass yet," Cherokee assured the deputy carelessly. "When do I collect?"

"If he checks out you don't collect a dollar," came back the deputy acridly.

Red hair glinted in the sunlight, as a girl, face as white as her apron, hurricaned through the doorway, shoving the 'breed's followers aside.

Eyes as fiery as her hair, she hurled herself at Cherokee's big form. Jeffries was reminded of a kitten attacking a tough old panther. Her small fists pummeled the 'breed's broad chest. "How dare you treat a man like that, you snake! You scorpion!" she accused, and her sharp-toed shoes thudded against his shins.

The 'breed could have broken her small figure in pieces with his big hands, but overcome with astonishment, he backed, vainly endeavoring to fend off the shower of blows with his brawny arms.

Jeffries stepped forward, grasped the raging girl's shoulder and hauled her back. She shook off his hand, pivoted to face him.

"And as for you, Jim Jeffries, I thought you were a man, not a monster. Are you paid to torture prisoners? Go get the doctor—at once!" She stamped a small foot to emphasize the words.

Discomfited, the deputy motioned for Cherokee to get outside, but the 'breed eyed him truculently, "Sure, mister, when I collect."

Margery sank on her knees beside the Texan's limp form. "Blood money!" she flung contemptuously over her shoulder. "If I had a gun, I'd pay you—with lead!"

The group of curious citizens crowding the doorway was steadily growing.

"Help!" wailed Margery Lawson loudly, "They're murdering a man! Someone get Doctor Barlow—quick!"

Jeffries' temper, always brittle, snapped. Never before had his office been the scene of such an uproar. "Gordamn you for a lousy Apache, Cherokee!" he snapped. "Get out of here before I plant you and your dog-blasted gang in the hoosegow. I can pin enough on you to send you up for ten years. Vamoosel!"

Silent Sanders elbowed his lanky form through the press outside. Several Circle R riders pushed at his heels. They had just hit town, and, attracted by the commotion, reined up at the law shack.

"Make it twenty years, Jim!" he drawled. He eased his gun forward, eyed Cherokee like a lean hound sizing up a coyote, "Want to deputize me?"

Sensing the growing hostility around him and the threat in the eyes of the Circle R riders, the 'breed sided towards the door, his companions crowding him. Dust billowed as they spurred out of town.

Tex hunched on the straw mattress of an iron cot in the adobe jail. A white shaft of light from the slit window overhead cut through the gloom like a flaming sword. With lackluster eyes he watched it creep down the bars of his cell as the sun slanted upward.

Recollection of events since he had sat by the campfire in the canyon and listened to the nighthawk circling overhead was still a blur, in which Margery Lawson was strangely mingled. His mouth and throat felt as though he had been eating ashes and his wrists were bandaged, but the pain in his head had eased to a dull ache and at last he could think coherently. He felt as though he had just awakened from a distorted dream.

Gritty hinges rasped as the outer door of the jail opened. A weathered old-timer, his long grey beard shot with white, six-gun buckled around his waist and a ring of keys dangling from one good arm, shuffled in. His left arm, withered, hung uselessly. Sam Slaughter had driven a stagecoach until maraud-

ing Apaches had put two arrows into his shoulder, back in the sixties. Since then he had officiated as jailer and general roundabout. It didn't pay much, but it kept him in bed and beans.

"I reckon, son," he drawled, unlocking the cell gate, "that Jim Jeffries craves a word with you."

Tex rose, swayed as his head whirled, steadied and moved towards the jail door. The greybeard at his heels steered him across a patch of bare ground, through an open door in the rear of the law shack, into the office.

The shirt-sleeved deputy occupied his smooth-worn armchair. Tilted against the wall on a straightback chair was the man Tex knew as Pete Powers, photographer.

"Set down," directed Jeffries shortly, nodding at a seat. Tex dropped onto it and, from habit, felt for the makin's. His hand came away as he recollected his pockets had been emptied.

The deputy pitched him a sack of Bull Durham and a packet of brown papers. At a nod from Powers, Sam Slaughter closed the street door.

"Yo're on a bad spot, Taylor," commented the deputy abruptly.

"D'ye think I don't know it?" came back the Texan, rolling a smoke.

"You know the penalty for murder?"

"Sure, but you corralled the wrong hombre."

"Who should I have picked up?"

Tex shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

"Quit bluffing," barked Jeffries. "Where d'ya get the six thousand you banked in Butte City?"

"Out of Coyote's cache."

"So I corralled the wrong fellow!" Derision edged the deputy's voice.

"I ain't lily-white," admitted Tex, drawing gratefully upon the cigarette, "but I ain't coal-black neither. Let me give you the straight of it."

"I'm listening," said Jeffries, pulling out his corn-cob.

The lawmen listened without a word as the Texan related his misadventures in Ghost Gulch; his fight with the Apaches, Coyote's slow death, his bequeathing of the gold, the looting of the cache."

There was a brief silence when he was through.

"You know what I think?" Jeffries tapped out his pipe bowl and eyed the prisoner sharply. "Maybe you didn't knife Coyote, it wasn't your style, but you cleaned out that cache. Hand over the dinero and maybe we can square the murder charge."

Tex drew a deep breath of resignation. "I can't, mister. I can no more lay my pothooks on that gold than you can."

Powers broke in smoothly. "The gold won't help you, Texan, when you're choking on a rope. That's loot—from Wells Fargo. Coyote was a stickup man. The mine was a blind. Wells Fargo wants its gold back. You act reasonable and, as Jeffries says, we can forget the killing and maybe drop you a couple of thousand."

"Dammit, didn't I make plain, another jasper got there first?" Tex's voice brittle with irritation.

"Not to me," said Jeffries dryly. He looked inquiringly across the room at the detective.

The latter shrugged. "If that's the way he feels, send him up for murder."

"Stick him back in the cooler," Jeffries told the jailer.

"And hang a noose outside the cell—just to remind him," said Powers.

When prisoner and jailer had left, Jeffries turned to the Wells Fargo man. "Reckon I'll take the hombre up to the county seat on the next stage. He's as guilty as hell."

Powers stuffed roughcut into the bowl of his corncob pipe, smooth forehead furrowed. "There's no need to rush this," he urged. "Leave the jasper cool off a few days. Maybe sight of that noose will soften him up."

## CHAPTER 18

BACK in his cell, Tex roamed restlessly around the confined space. It was plain the lawmen thought him a liar; everyone would. If he was in their shoes he knew he'd think the same. There was not a thread of proof to tie his story together. When he went before a jury he'd hang, as sure as night follows day.

Sam, the jailer, hauled in a ladder and hung a looped rope from the ceiling. The noose dangled, shoulder high, on the other side of the cell gate. The prisoner watched him morosely.

Just before noon he had a visitor. Juanita Silva, beautiful as a budding rose, entered behind the old jailer. The ancient dropped onto a stool in the passageway, watching closely. No guns were going to be passed to his prisoners.

She eyed the hanging noose, then shouldered it aside, "Theese place, it is so cheerful," she commented. Her petulant lips curled in a taunting smile, as she peered between thee bars. "So! My brave Yanqui ropes a man so that he cannot move and knife heem! You are wan brave man!"

"Vamoose!" growled Tex, plumped down on the bunk.

"He steals gold, much gold, and now he cannot spend eet!" she scoffed. "How sad, señor."

The girl swung around at sound of a step in the doorway. Margery Lawson entered, carrying a tray, over which was spread a white napkin. At sight of the vision standing against the bars of Tex's cell, she abruptly set the tray on the hard-packed adobe floor, turned and hurried out.

Tex's head came up. "Who was that?" he asked the jailer.

Juanita's laughter trilled. "The redhead who waits at table. She ees crazy about you, señor. But you weel never marry her. There is your bride!" She thrust a hand through the hanging noose.

Tex appealed to the jailer, "For gosh sakes, get this hellcat out of here!"

Head turned, mocking to the end, she moved towards the door, to collide with Chauncey Wythington-Smythe's tweeded

form. The Dude bowed stiffly and doffed his Stetson. "A thousand pardons, señorita!"

She flashed him a quick smile and was gone.

"By jove, it's that peach of a girl again!" exclaimed the Englishman, gazing after her.

"Yep, pretty as a cholla blossom," responded Tex from the bunk. "Get to know her better. You'll find she is prickly as a porcupine."

"Before," confessed the Dude, "I have beheld the lady through an alcoholic haze. Now that I have thrown off the demon rum, my eyesight has clarified—immensely, and I firmly intend to improve the acquaintance. By the way, could I have a few minutes with you—alone?"

"Ask Sam over there, he's the boss."

The Dude turned towards the grey-bearded jailer. He dipped into a pants' pocket and produced a ten-dollar gold piece. Spinning it carelessly in the air, he approached the old-timer.

"Would it be possible, my good man, to arrange for a few minutes' private conversation with—er—your guest?"

"Nope!" returned Sam firmly, but his eyes followed the spinning gold piece.

"I'll be brief," promised the Dude. "Catch!" The coin made a golden arc—and landed in Sam's horny right hand.

"It's against the rules," he grumbled, "and I got to search yuh."

"Search on, old bean," invited the other, blithely, "I never carry a weapon."

The jailer ran his good hand expertly over the Dude's form, then turned to the door. "Two minutes," he conceded.

As the old fellow trudged out, the Dude moved close to the bars. He whispered urgently, "Return my hunter and I'll smuggle in a gun—word of honor!"

"Hyphen," growled the Texan, ominously. "I'm getting mighty sick of being called a liar. I never saw your watch, I ain't got your watch and I ain't a mite interested in your dog-



goned watch. Now chew on that—and beat it!” Disgusted, he moved back to his bed again and stretched out.

“By jove!” murmured the Dude, in dismay. “I really believe you are telling the truth. Well, so long! While there’s life, there’s hope.” He glanced at the rope distastefully.

Margery Lawson slipped in after he left. She picked up the tray and carried it towards the cell. “Your meal is probably cold,” she announced frigidly. “Will you be holding a reception every day?”

Tex glowered at her between the bars. “Did I ask ’em to call?”

“Listen, Tex.” Her voice dropped, became tense. “Peewee rode in, he just managed to make it. He’s all shot up. Someone burned your cabin and ran off the stock.”

The Texan tensed like a steel spring. “Cherokee!” He spat out the name like a curse. “Say, Marg, I got to get out of here.”

The scuffling of boots on the sandy earth outside pulled Margery back from the bars. When Sam shuffled through the doorway she was sliding a thick steak on a large plate, with all the trimmings, beneath the cell gate. A liberal slice of dried-apple pie and coffee followed.

“That ain’t prison fare,” grumbled the ancient, settling heavily on his stool. “It ain’t right prisoners should live high.”

“Tex shouldn’t be a prisoner,” declared the girl, tossing her head. “It’s ridiculous to claim he killed that horrid old prospector.”

“Where’s your proof?” challenged Sam, longing eyes on the newly baked apple pie.

“A woman doesn’t need proof—she just knows!” Margery straightened. “I’ll be back for the dishes.”

“Hey, you clean up the pie,” invited Tex, pushing the plate outside. “You been eying it like you’re hungry enough to gnaw a saddle blanket.”

Sam needed no further invitation. When he set the empty plate aside, he bit off a chaw of tobacco and scowled long and fiercely at the dangling noose. At length, he rose, jerked it down and tossed it into a corner.

"Never did like the looks of that, nohow," he grunted.

Tex grinned approval. Unaccountably, his spirits had risen, despite news of the calamity in Hope Valley. Maybe it was thought of Margery Lawson's loyalty.

Sam was trimming the wick of the stable lamp, whose weak yellow glow provided the sole illumination in the jail after sundown, when Margery arrived with the prisoner's supper.

She passed the laden dishes beneath the gate, while the old jailer stood by and sniffed disapproval at its abundance. Following the dishes, came a fresh-baked loaf of bread, its crust golden-brown, and a large hunk of cheese.

"That," she said, and her eyes raised to Tex significantly, "you may need later."

Sam snorted outright.

When the girl left, he hung the lantern upon its peg and lingered outside the cell. "There ain't nothing," he threw out offhand, "beats a chunk of new-made bread and a slice of cheese."

"Drop in later and we'll split the loaf, old-timer," said Tex, eating on the bunk.

Sam groaned, clumped away and the heavy outer door banged behind him.

Alone in the dim-lit jail, Tex grabbed the loaf, and was not surprised when it weighed down his hand like a brick. He twisted it. The crust broke away and revealed a canvas-wrapped package inside. Quickly, he unrolled the scorched canvas and hefted a squat derringer. In his coffee cup were half a dozen shells.

He set the shells to dry and stuck the "gambler's gun" beneath his waistband, then settled down to wait.

It seemed like a lifetime, but not two hours had passed before the prisoner tensed at the sound of a key in the lock of the outer door.

Almost invisible in the shadows, he listened as the door rasped open and the old jailer clumped in.

"Well, Sam," he hailed, sauntering up to the bars, the rem-

nants of the loaf on a plate in his left hand. "D'ye still crave to eat?"

"I can always eat," declared the ancient.

"Come and get it."

The jailer stepped close, stooped as Tex pushed the plate beneath the gate. The prisoner's left hand fastened onto Sam's shaggy hair and the muzzle of a derringer nuzzled his left ear.

"Unlock the gate, Sam!" gritted the prisoner, "or I'll scatter your brains, sure'r than hell. I can only swing once!" He released the jailer's hair, stretched out and lifted his heavy Colt out of the holster. "Rattle your hocks!" he growled.

Bewildered, the old-timer straightened and stared into the barrels of two levelled guns. In outraged silence, he yanked out his keys. A click and the cell door was open.

Tex stepped outside, nudged Sam with the derringer. "Slide in!" he directed.

Grudgingly, the jailer shuffled inside and the cell gate clanged upon him. Tex laid the Colt on the stool. "Sorry I had to get tough, Sam. There wasn't no other way."

The jailer's aggrieved voice came from the darkness of the cell. "You wolf all that cheese, you hog?"

Tex could not refuse a chuckle in spite of his taut nerves. He moved cautiously towards the outer door.

Outside the jail he paused uncertainly. Ahead, the rear of the buildings in Main Street rose black and square before him. The safe course would be to beat it for the livery, grab a pony, and high-tail. But his gun-belt was in the law shack and he craved the feel of it around his waist.

Was Jeffries around? There lay his danger. At least he could take a looksee. Cloaked by darkness, he moved quickly across the patch of waste ground. Pulse racing, he eased along the side of the law shack, peered out onto the plankwalk. The office windows were dark. He slid to the doorway. It was padlocked.

Down street, light blazed from The Four Aces. Men dribbled in and out. Two townsmen thumped along the plankwalk and flung careless greeting as they passed. Tex grunted a reply and

held his breath, tensed for trouble. But they passed on unheeding and were swallowed by the shadows.

Muffled shouting arose from the jail. To the sweating Texan, it seemed that the whole town must hear it. Frantically, he worried key after key into the lock. Trouble might explode any moment. The padlock unexpectedly clicked open. He pushed inside, fumbled around in the dark. When last in the office he had marked his gun-belt hanging above the desk. With a sigh of relief he found it and buckled it above his hips.

Sam had quit bellowing. Probably cleaning up the bread and cheese, thought the fugitive. He slunk down the alley again, picked his way along the rear of the stores, stumbling against garbage cans, tripping over broken boxes, slipping upon empty bottles. Finally, he emerged upon a vacant lot. Slantwise across the street bulked the darkened livery barn. A quick glance to right and left and he hurried over the ruts. Chances were that Bill Yeager, the liveryman, was in the saloon.

Plucking a match from his hatband, Tex set it to a stable lamp and strode hastily down the row of stalls, eyeing the stamping ponies, in search for the buckskin. When he saw it, astonishment set him back upon his heels. The pony was saddled and bridled and a gunny sack bulged at the horn. Fer-vently, he blessed Margery Lawson—she overlooked nothing! A sudden thought led him to pick up a spade and tie it beside the gunny sack.

Caution urged him to wheel southward when he rode out through the wide doorway and put all distance possible between himself and town before the alarm was raised. But confidence, born of his good luck, or maybe just plain devilment, led him to knee the pony northward and jog down the length of Main Street. It was too dark for recognition, except where broad shafts of light slanted across the plankwalk from The Four Aces and puddled yellow upon the ruts.

Then his luck ran out. He glimpsed the spare form of Deputy Sheriff Jeffries silhouetted outside the batwings. It was too late to wheel. Dropping his head, so that his hat brim

would shade his features, he commenced to jog ahead. But he forgot the white bandages around his wrists, making him as conspicuous as a piebald pony in a dun herd.

## CHAPTER 19

AT JEFFRIES' startled shout, the fugitive plunged the rowels home and dropped down across the withers of the buckskin as it leaped forward. A six-gun boomed and he heard the drone of the slug. The pony was moving fast now, hooves flailing the dusty street. Again the gun thundered, distantly. Out of gunshot range, the fugitive swung around in the saddle. Men were boiling from The Four Aces. He gave the pony its head for two blocks, then curbed it sharply and wheeled through a narrow alley. Emerging upon a stretch of open ground, he held the pony down to a walk and rode sedately towards the scattered bungalows of the residential section. Beneath a cottonwood, he reined and sat listening intently in the darkness. Hooves clattered from the direction of Main Street and faint yippees reached his ears as a pack of riders whooped out of town in pursuit. It didn't take Jeffries long to gather a posse, he considered, but if they held that pace they'd blow their mounts before they lost sight of town.

He heeled the buckskin and jogged eastward until Skull Creek was a dark blur on the flats behind him. Then he wheeled northward, heading for the ford, at the junction of the two creeks.

Dawn saw the fugitive, bathed in sweat, throwing the final shovelfuls of earth into the creek from the cave he had enlarged beneath the roots of the old cottonwood at the ford.

His sack of food was set in a corner, the buckskin was tethered in a thick clump of manzanita a quarter-mile up creek, he had space enough to stretch out on the ground—and he could not be seen by anyone who might cross the ford. Unless he was careless enough to leave tracks, or someone stumbled over his pony, Jeffries' posses might comb the valley for a month and never dig him out.

Tex set the shovel against the sandy sidewall of the cave. It would be dangerous to discolor the stream now that daylight was strengthening. He lay down and gratefully eased sore muscles. Resting, he considered his plans. The first was to get Cherokee. He owed the 'breed plenty for delivering him to the law to collect blood money; second for shooting up Peewee and blotting out the spread.

The Texan had chewed all this over before as he hunched in the cell, derringer under his waistband, waiting for the jailer.

If Cherokee was still skulking around the valley with his gang it meant that he hadn't quit raiding Rock's herds. Habit is hard to break and the ford was a natural outlet for rustled stock, with the vast stretch of the Barrens beyond it. There were too many quicksands in Rattlesnake Creek to cross it at random. So, debated the Texan, if he stuck around the ford long enough, he had a gambler's chance of trailing another rustled herd and nosing out the 'breed's new hideaway. And he wouldn't tip his hand this time!

Holed up behind the twisted roots of the gnarled cottonwood, like a badger in its den, the fugitive watched the ford. Before the day was spent, a posse, headed by Jeffries, splashed across the sandy shallows. These were not whooping cow-punchers, but alkalied old-timers, tireless as their lean ponies. Shortly after, the plop of a solitary pony's hooves into water again stirred Tex into wakefulness. Peering out, he saw that it was the photographer, heading for the spread, maybe bent on searching for the lost gold.

After dark, he heard the posse jingle back. The photographer trailed them the following morning. But there was no rumble of rustled cows throughout the night.

Days dragged, but still the fugitive kept cases on the crossing. Confidence in his hunch that Cherokee was still swinging a wide loop and driving across the ford was weakening. But he stuck stubbornly in his cave. He had plenty of chuck and good water flowed at his feet. Daily he tended the pony, watering it and moving it to fresh grass. He dozed by day and kept

a ceaseless vigil by night, hunkered on the edge of the purling creek. These were lonely nights, with no sound in the air save the faint scurrying of night animals, the occasional muted splash of a leaping fish; the squeaking of wood mice in the recesses of the cave. Once a small herd of pronghorns drifted silently up the ford, caught a whiff of man-scent and faded into the night again like grey ghosts.

The fugitive's thoughts were somber companions upon these solitary watches. Even though he slapped back at the 'breed, the murder charge still hung over him. Wherever there was law, it would haunt him until he died. Before now his description had been circulated far and wide. He had nothing. His spread was gutted, cows gone and Peewee crippled, maybe dead by now. The gold he had banked in Butte City was beyond his reach. Only 'across the Border would he be free of warrants and posses. True, he considered, there were ranches—big ranches—in Sonora and Chihuahua, and plenty riffraff, too. Then he thought of Margery Lawson and knew he couldn't ride away. The wrong side of the Border was no place for a woman.

As time passed, the fugitive fought a growing restlessness. His chuck was running low; he had no soogans, save a flea-ridden horse blanket, to keep out the chilly night air; mice were beginning to swarm in the cave; inaction galled him.

Seemed as though he'd guessed wrong, he decided one evening, as he watched the stars pinpoint the heavens. He'd pull out and drift around the Barrens. Jeffries' posse was likely disbanded, long back. No county sheriff stomached keeping men in the saddle at five dollars per diem.

When the darkness thickened, he gathered his few belongings, slung the gunny sack across his shoulder and stepped out into the water. For a while, he waded upstream, then clambered up the bank and threaded through clumped brush. The buckskin was saddled and he was tying the gunny sack to his saddle strings when he paused, head half-turned. It was unmistakable—the low rumble of a moving herd.

Careless of tracks now, thrilling with suppressed excite-

ment, he doubled back through the brush, towards the ford . . . once again he eyed a bellowing dust-swathed stream of beef, choused by yelling riders, writhing like a huge dim snake across the creek. Cherokee had sure bit deep this time.

Taking no chances, he tailed the rustled herd at a safe distance. Through the hours, it circled wide; over the valley rim, far out into the Barrens, back into the dim hills. And when the moon hung high, the astonished Texan watched it disappear into the old familiar canyon.

When the rocky portals had swallowed the last of the drag, he headed his tiring pony towards the Circle R. As he rode he began to appreciate Cherokee's astuteness. The abandoned hideaway would be the last place the Circle R punchers, hunting their lost beef, would head.

When he eased the gaunted buckskin across the hoof-pocked Circle R yard it was daylight. Ropes whirled in the corral as riders caught their mounts for the day; a late riser cinched up his pants as he hurried into the cook shack; Silent Sanders' lean form was etched against the bunkhouse.

Amazement glimmered in the foreman's eyes as he glimpsed the trail-worn horse and rider. Tex swung wearily out of the saddle.

"Holy Moses!" drawled Sanders, bony face expressionless. "You still loose—with a thousand dollars on your head?"

"Lissen," said Tex tersely, "D'ye crave to collect a bounty or a big slice of your beef? Cherokee run off plenty last night, and they're in the canyon right now."

"What canyon?"

"The same."

"If thet 'breed ain't got more gall than a brass monkey!" ejaculated Sanders. His shout checked two punchers riding out of the yard. He stepped briskly towards the corral. "Rope me a fresh horse!" Tex flung after him.

Across the face of the Barrens, patched with grisly-white alkali, pocked with protruding rock, blotched with spined



cacti, a compact bunch of Circle R punchers jogged beneath a blazing sun.

Though saddle-sore and droop-eyed, Tex was well content. His hunch had paid off. Twenty waddies thumped their saddles, plenty to handle Cherokee's gang, and he had marked the 'breed for himself. Rock and his son, he had learned from Sanders, were in Kansas City, arranging beef shipments, and the foreman was determined to clean up, and clean up good.

"Can't figure why you'd side the Circle R," commented Sanders as they jogged steadily towards the sullen hills ahead. "You took a big chance riding in thataway."

"Cherokee sold me for a thousand dollars, blotted out my spread, gunned my pard," came back the Texan. "Ain't that good reason?"

Sanders grunted.

They were nearing the line of cliff now, through which the entrance to the rustler's hideout was punched. There was no sign of activity. The lofty ramparts sat as though undisturbed for a thousand years, quietly crumbling into the talus that was heaped at their base; a buzzard swung in slow circles upon ragged pinions; the plain undulated through waves of heated air. A sickening premonition hit Tex that the quick-witted Cherokee had fooled him again.

The entrance to the canyon grew plain. A gunshot crackled across the barren flat.

Sanders threw up a hand and checked the cavalcade. He stepped down, pulled a spyglass out of a saddlebag and levelled it across the withers of his pony. After a long survey, he handed it to Tex.

Eagerly, the Texan scanned the canyon mouth. All doubt was dissipated. The wolf had not slunk away—he was waiting with fangs bared. Boulders had been hastily rolled across the entrance, forming a low wall. The muzzles of rifles were plain in the glass, protruding from between the rocks. Grey-shirted forms were setting more rocks upon the barricade, working frantically to strengthen their defense. It was plain that the rustlers had been taken by surprise—too late to flee.

This would be a fight to the death. For them, defeat meant a looped rope and a high branch.

Sanders rasped his chin, then turned to the punchers bunched thick behind him, bronzed faces eager and intent.

"We gotta get them brand-blotchers, boys!" His dry voice was as matter-of-fact as though he was discussing rounding up a herd. "We can lay out here, fry in the sun, and corral 'em—which will be mighty tiresome. Or we can bull in and clean up the sons of bitches. But get this, if we do some of you jaspers are gonna taste lead."

"Les go get 'em," urged a wiry copperhead. A growling chorus of approval arose.

"Always spoiling for a fight, ain't you, O'Reilly?" grunted Sanders. "Wal, you'll get a bellyful!" He swung into the saddle of his big black. His voice raised. "Fan out, and save your lead. I'll set the pace. When I loose off a slug, dig your pothooks into them ponies and ride like the devil was on your tail."

He heeled the black. Saddlery creaked and bit chains jangled as the punchers pushed out on either side. In ominous quiet the line moved forward—a walk, a trot, a canter—faster, faster, faster. Rifles spanged from behind the barricade. Whinnying lead threw up tiny sports of dust. A rider crashed down. Sanders' six-gun thundered. The whole line burst into frenzied motion. Wild yippees ripped the air. The hooves of racing cow ponies hammered the heat-hardened ground in mad tattoo. Necks outstretched, nostrils flared, they streaked for the canyon mouth, the yelling demons on their backs urging them with voice and spur.

## CHAPTER 20

FOR a short spurt there is perhaps nothing on legs faster than a cow pony. Tex had little time for thought as his wiry mount stretched out and streaked over the ground. Ahead, the rock barricade seemed to be towards him. From behind it, lances of fire leapt out as the grim-visaged rustlers frantically

pumped lead into the ragged line of horsemen thundering down upon them.

The vicious spang of rifles mingled with the deeper boom of six-guns, while pounding hooves drummed a rumbling accompaniment to the high-pitched yelling of the excited riders. To Tex's right a racing pony suddenly somersaulted and went down with threshing hooves, stopped by a slug. Its rider catapulted out of the saddle and was lost in the flurrying dust. A yell died in the throat of another rider, almost at his stirrup. The puncher dropped across his pony's withers, grasped feebly at the saddle horn, slid down beneath the churning hooves.

Then the barricade loomed in front of the Texan. His pony gathered itself under him, flew through the air and cleared the barrier. Beneath the leaping pony, he glimpsed the dark features of a renegade, slewing up his rifle barrel. He thumbed the hammer of his six-gun and the rustler staggered. Another was slammed down as the ironshod hoof of a pony hammered against his chest. Around the Texan, through the din and dust, whirled a desperate melee. Plunging ponies and lead-laced renegades appeared and disappeared into the churning dust fog. The roar of forty-fives mingled with the hoarse curses of panting men, and the whinnying of terror-stricken ponies rose above the groans of the wounded. Tex gunned another rustler, backed against the barrier, loosed lead until his gun was hot, then rode down the dodging renegades, with no chance to plug out the empties. Sorely hit, men crawled from beneath stamping hooves, or writhed in agony; curses cut through the crimson-stabbed gloom; the acrid bite of powder-smoke mingled with the stench of blood and sweated bodies.

Then, incredibly, the din died away. The smoking six-gun of a dead rustler gripped in his sweated fist, the Texan squinted into the haze. Slowly, the air cleared. Bright sunlight bit through a myriad glittering dust particles.

Backed against the rock-wall, four sullen-faced rustlers stood with upraised arms, scowling into the muzzles of ring-

ing guns. Sprawled forms of men cluttered the ground, some still, others twisting with pain.

Sanders loomed up on his black pony, gathered a fistful of punchers and spurred into the canyon. Tex swung to the ground, searched among the dead and dying, hunting Cherokee, but the 'breed was not there. He swung into the saddle again and urged the pony into a gallop, hot on Sander's trail.

After the hell behind him, it seemed like paradise to ride into the quiet canyon. Quail piped as he rode through the clumped mesquite, blue jays scolded harshly and a grey squirrel scampered across the trail. He emerged from the brush and the meadow stretched before him. Bunched, horns clacking, the stolen stock circled uneasily.

To his right, the knot of Circle R riders were pounding towards the clearing where pots were suspended above a blazing campfire. Dirty flour sack around his waist, the cook awaited them, his arms stretched high.

"What's your moniker?" rasped Sanders, as the riders surrounded him.

"Greasy Gus."

"Any more of your thieving sheepherders around?"

The cook dropped his arms and nervously smoothed his apron. "Nope, there ain't no more, gents," he assured them, a quaver in his voice. He was an elderly man, with tobacco-stained iron-grey mustache and slack, fleshy features. Fear glimmered stark in his watery eyes as he fidgeted in the midst of the begrimed, grim-faced punchers.

Tex rode up. "We ain't got Cherokee," he said curtly.

"That sidewinder been around?" Sanders' cold eyes fixed the cook again.

"Sure," volunteered the cook eagerly. "He gathered every dawgoned waddy to build a wall when the lookout lamped you jaspers."

"I gamble the bustard's skulking in the brush," said Sanders. "You, O'Reilly and Bones, bottle up the entrance. Tell the boys to hustle over with the prisoners. We'll comb out every corner of this blasted canyon."

But although a dozen riders beat through every patch of brush and scoured the canyon, they failed to dig out the wily Cherokee . . . five crippled Circle R punchers lay in the shade of the chaparral, bandannas wrapped rudely around their wounds. By the hastily-built barricade, the corpses of three more, with the forms of six rustlers, were set in a slow-stiffening row. A knot of prisoners, hands lashed behind them, stood still-faced by the shack.

Punchers hunkered around, smoking while the cook hovered over the fire. Sanders eyed the four prisoners and lifted his shoulders. "Might as well get it over with."

In response to his curt order, four ponies were brought forward and the prisoners set in the saddle. The ponies were lined up beneath a stout branch of an oak, back in the grove. Four ropes were tossed over the branch and running nooses draped around the rustlers' necks.

"Anything to say, boys?" asked the foreman.

Three sat with tight-locked lips, staring into eternity.

The fourth jerked his head toward a pocket of his loose-dangling vest. "Guess I owe the biscuit-walloper ten dollars. Give him my watch—I sure won't need it any more."

A puncher stepped between the slack-hipped ponies and lifted a slim gold watch from the vest.

Sanders raised his arm. Four quirts stung the rumps of the ponies. In affright they sprang forward. The bodies of four pinioned men swung in the air, legs jerking convulsively.

A rider rounded up the riderless ponies, while four bodies—now slack—swayed in lessening arcs.

Silence hung heavy on the punchers as they moved back to the clearing. Justice had been done. A rope for a rustler had always been the law of the range. But it didn't make death any the less unpleasant.

Tex braced the rider with the gold watch. The initials C.W.S. were engraved in the form of a neat monogram on the back. He pressed the stem and the watch chimed—a low musical note. "That's Hyphen's!" he exclaimed, and disappointment leaded his spirits. The Dude had claimed it was

stolen from Coyote Cal. Chances were the secret of Coyote's killing had died with the rustler.

He passed the watch to Sanders and told of the story behind it. "Give it back to Hyphen," he concluded, "and don't forget to tell the Limey where it came from. He still figures I stole that watch."

"So the feller who lifted the watch beefed Coyote?" queried the foreman.

"That's how Hyphen figures it."

"And they got you tagged with the killing?"

"A thousand dollar label," said Tex, with a mirthless grin.

"Maybe that greasy cuss at the fire can help us!" The foreman strode to the campfire, where the cook was still fluttering around his pots, darting uneasy glances at the dark forms swinging like pendulums beneath the oak.

"You lamped this ticker before?" queried Sanders.

"Sure, Brazos packed it."

"And where did he get it?"

"Won it in a poker game."

"Who from?"

"Heck!" remonstrated the harassed cook, "How in hell would I know? I reckon half a dozen fellers packed that watch at different times. It went in the kitty regular. Maybe you shoulda braced Brazos before you hung him up to dry." The fate of the four rustlers plainly weighed on his mind. "Say, I ain't no brand-blotcher!"

"You run with the pack," came back Sanders cryptically.

"You ain't swinging me for that!" The cook's fleshy jowls quivered.

"Wal," the foreman rasped his chin, and there was sardonic amusement in his hard eyes, "You dish up your chuck. If it ain't what it should be—" He left the sentence unfinished, just nodded at the four forms suspended beneath the oak.

A long procession dragged across the flats as the mauled Circle R fighting force headed for their home ranch. First a tight bunch of punchers, Sanders and the Texan at their head. Behind them straggled the five wounded men, each

with a pard to side him and give what help he could. Next two punchers leading a string of rustlers' ponies. In the rear, the rescued herd, hazed by four punchers.

Fading in the distance, the boulders from the barricade were piled in a mound, beneath which slept the dead—punchers and rustlers in a common grave. Under the oak, four bodies still hung. The buzzards were beginning to flutter around.

Outside the cook-shack, Greasy Gus whistled cheerfully as he wrapped his butcher knives in the flour sack and tied a worn bedroll behind the saddle. He never figured he'd get out of that jackpot so easy. From time to time he glanced hesitatingly at the four swinging bodies. Finally he dragged his feet over the ground towards them, as though drawn by a magnet. Distaste struggled with the greed in his eyes. "Hell," he muttered, "Droopeye won the jackpot last night, must be packing five-six hundred."

The buzzards flapped awkwardly into the air, circling upon ungainly wings, around his head. The cook stopped, repelled by the gaping mouths and protruding tongues of the dead men. Gingerly, he edged closer. With fumbling fingers he rifled the dead men's pockets, thrusting greenbacks and coin into his jeans.

Pockets bulging with the loot, he hastened back to his pony . . . a gunshot crashed loud in the silent canyon. Greasy Gus jerked erect, staggered, stared around stupidly. Slowly, like a punctured water bag, he sank down.

A shrub quivered against the foot of the cliff, beyond the grove. Legs still hidden in the narrow mouth of the abandoned wolf-den from which he had just squirmed, Cherokee levered another shell into the breach of his Winchester and straightened.

With long silent strides, he loped across to the remains of the cook. Carelessly he rolled the warm body over with his foot, bent and despoiled the dead man of his loot.

Then he headed for the saddled pony.

The buzzards dropped down again.

There was little talk as Rock's punchers jogged across the Barrens. Even the battling Irishman, O'Reilly was silent. Talk would come later, when the shock of the wild ruckus at the canyon mouth had lost its sharp edge and memory of the pards they had left behind had dimmed a little. Then the affray would be hashed over at many a bunkhouse session.

Sanders broke a long silence. "I never figured you beefed Coyote."

Tex grinned crookedly, "Plenty do."

"I reckon the sidewinder who tortured the old coot is planted back in the canyon."

"That won't help me any."

"Maybe the ticker will clear you."

Tex shrugged, "What does it prove? Nothing—to the law. Maybe Coyote staked it in a poker game. Maybe he sold it. Maybe he lost it, who knows? Dead men don't talk!"

"Where are you heading for?"

The Texan shrugged despondently.

Sundown found him in the old hideout beneath the cottonwood. Cherokee's gang had been broken up, but the Circle R was the gainer, not him; for the 'breed had slipped through their fingers. As for himself, he pondered, there was little he could do except skulk around the valley like a hunted animal, well knowing that sooner or later, the law hounds would nose him out.

Two days passed. As he lay in the cave it seemed that the world had forgotten him. No one passed down the trail and not a ripple disturbed the smooth surface of the crossing. The very silence and uncertainty rasped his nerves. Maybe, he mused, Peewee was dead. Maybe Jeffries had arrested Margery Lawson for her part in the jail break. Maybe the mysterious photographer had uncovered the loot. Maybe even a miracle occurred and they had corralled the killer. How could they, commonsense asked him, when chances were the killer lay buried in the rustlers' canyon.



Lightning speared fitfully back in the hills. By the evening of the third day a heavy pall had spread across the sky, blanking out the stars. The atmosphere was sticky and oppressive as a wet blanket. The creek was rising, already tiny rivulets dribbled into the cave. The fugitive squished around in sticky mud. Rain back in the hills, he considered, eying the silty stream, now flowing fast and sullen. Chances were he'd be washed out of the cave before sunup. Finally he waded upstream, saddled his pony and hit for Skull Creek.

On the fringe of town he reined the buckskin into the darkness of the willows that shaded the creek. He tied the pony and hung his spurs on the saddle horn, then ghosted along the creek.

From a shadowed alley opposite the Good Eats he eyed the restaurant. Relief flooded him when he glimpsed Margery's trim form through the steamy window. At least, she was free. He was tempted to take a chance and cross the street, but patrons were continually drifting in and out of the restaurant. And, he thought grimly, no man would pass up a chance of earning an easy thousand dollars.

Further down the block The Four Aces was going full blast, with ponies thick at the rail outside. Jeffries' law shack appeared to be deserted.

For an hour he lurked in the shadows, waiting for the restaurant to close.

The oil lamps blinked out. Dimly, he saw Hans Wurd's portly form at the door. Margery stepped out and struck across the street. Wurd remained to padlock the door.

The girl mounted the plankwalk fifty paces or so below him. Her shoes tapped briskly on the wooden walk. He whistled, mentally cursing his thoughtlessness as her head came around and she glimpsed a dim, lurking form. Startled, she broke into a run. He slipped silently along the store fronts in pursuit.

Outside the Trading Post, he stopped, gazing around in perplexity. The shadowy form of the girl had vanished. As he stood beneath the canopy of the store debating his next move

a light winked on in a small shack in the rear of a lot beside it. The shack was bounded by a low fence. He headed across the lot, skirted the fence, pushed open a gate and entered a yard, across which sheets and other clothes were hanging from a sagging line. Through a window he sighted the girl moving inside. With quick relief he stepped eagerly forward. From behind the further fence came a faint metallic clatter. It might have been a boot stirring an empty can, or a roaming animal. Nerves jumping, the fugitive spun around, slapping his gun butt. A cat scrambled from the far side of the fence, jumped noiselessly and streaked across the yard.

With a deep-drawn breath, the Texan relaxed, stepped up to the closed door of the shack, knuckled gently.

The door flung open and Margery stood framed in the glow of an oil lamp, bracketed on the wall. The light fell full upon his drawn unshaven features.

"Why, Tex!" she exclaimed in delight.

"Howdy," he muttered, and discovered that he was unaccountably tongue-tied. "How's Pee wee?" he jerked out finally.

"Mending slowly, but still in bed." She glanced nervously past him into the darkened yard. "Hadn't you better step inside?"

Tex hesitated, "Wal—"

"Reach, Texan!" The cool command came from the night behind him.

Margery stifled a scream. He swung around to face a levelled gun, behind it the deputy's weathered feature.

Jeffries moved closer. "Reach!" he repeated. Tex's hands reluctantly raised shoulder high.

"It never fails," chuckled the lawman. "Sooner or later, they always drop in to see their gals."

## CHAPTER 21

RAINDROPS commenced to patter on the dry dust of the yard. With a quick cry of alarm, Margery pushed past the cornered Texan and commenced to hastily gather her dry sheets off the line. Facing the levelled gun, Tex was vaguely conscious of the girl in the background, behind the deputy, gathering in her washing . . . a white sheet ballooned over Jeffries' head. It dropped over his head and shoulders. Blinded, he swayed and struggled frenziedly beneath the smothering sheet, striving to throw off the fury that leaped upon his back. Fingers digging into the billowing sheet and the clothing beneath, Margery clung like a saddle burr, shrieking, "Run, Tex, run!"

The fugitive dashed across the yard, leaped the fence and plunged along the plankwalk in headlong flight. There was no sign of pursuit from the frustrated deputy when he reached his pony and swung into the saddle.

Skull Creek was no longer a shallow, slumbering stream, sliding placidly southward, to be eventually absorbed by the thirsty desert. It had become a torrent, rising higher every minute, its swirling waters biting at the loose, sandy banks.

Without hesitation, the Texan headed his pony into its dark waters. Quickly the buckskin was bellyhigh, fighting to keep its feet against the battering of the current. Then it was swimming, and floating rapidly downstream. Tex slipped out of the saddle. Gradually, the pony worked towards the further bank. Water streaming from his clothing, Tex breathed a sigh of relief as he scrambled up the crumbling bank beside it. In another thirty minutes Skull Creek would be impassable.

Rain poured down heavily now and surrounded the fugitive like a black pall, hissing into the slippery, thirsty ground.

"Where now?" he pondered. His cave beneath the cottonwood was under water. The rustlers' canyon? He rejected it with distaste. It reeked with death and destruction.

Ghost Gulch! What better hideaway than the abandoned

workings, deep in the Barrens? Beneath the wan light of a watery moon, faint and thin through the leaden overcast, he hit westward.

At dawn, he stepped out of the Circle R line cabin at the headwaters of Rattlesnake Creek. The rich odor of sodden earth was heavy on the air, but the clouds had rolled away and the sun crept up into a sky of verdant blue. Birds twittered joyously in the brush and chipmunks chased across the roof of the cabin.

He breakfasted on coffee and flapjacks and dropped the tight-lidded cans of coffee, sugar and flour he'd found on the cabin shelf into the gunny sack. He'd never looted a line cabin before, but—he thought wryly—he'd never been in as tight a jackpot as this before. Ghost Gulch offered plenty of solitude, but little else.

Night had again fallen when he rode through the gloomy corridor of the Gulch, past the whitening bones of the Apaches' ponies. A great white moon bathed the Barrens with cold light, silvering the deserted cabins, mouldering machinery and weedy dumps of tailings.

With a quick exclamation, Tex checked his pony. There was a light in the bungalow!

For a long moment he regarded the yellow square of light, telling of life in the house that stood alone, among the scrub oak, pondering this new problem with furrowed brow.

Who would be in Ghost Gulch? A prospector, or wandering saddle bum, the fugitive decided at last, attracted by the story of Coyote's mine. He heeled the buckskin.

At a walk, he dropped down the silent gulch, rode through the gap in the fence and approached the bungalow. Two ponies were tied to the porch rail, indistinct in the shadows.

Silently, the Texan slid out of the saddle, ground-hitched the buckskin and unstrapped his spurs. Cat-toed, he crept forward, moved around the trunk of a tree. At a thought, he reached up, grasped a branch, hauled himself up . . . his jaw slackened with surprise as he focused the interior of the lighted room through a glassless window. Lying on the bunk, tightly

trussed, was the smooth-faced photographer, despair-dulled eyes fixed upon Cherokee's sinister form. The 'breed stood by the table, tossing his sheath knife into the air and carelessly catching it with his right hand, plainly taunting the prisoner. Clinging precariously to the swaying branch, Tex could not use his gun. He dropped down, headed for the porch at a quick run.

A pony whinnied in the darkness. Abruptly, the door of the bungalow flung open and the Texan, coming to a quick stop, was revealed in the light that flooded out, crouching in the open.

Taken by surprise, Tex straightened, grabbing for his iron. Flame lanced from the doorway. Pain skewered the Texan's right leg. He went down, rolled over, threw a slug as Cherokee dove for the gloom of the porch. Still bathed in lamplight, Tex fought to regain his feet, but his leg was numb and useless. Desperately, he rolled over and over, seeking to gain protection of the shadows. Again, gun-flame bloomed red from the porch above him. The slug tore through his right forearm, shattering the elbow. He struggled to his knees, reached across his body with his left hand, while his bloody right arm drooped uselessly. He threw lead at the gun flash. For a third time the remorseless gun thundered from the darkness and a bullet smashed into his right shoulder, slamming him down. A helpless hulk, he lay bathed in the soft yellow lamplight, eyes searching vainly for sight of his hidden assailant.

Yet again, the gun on the porch thundered. The desperately wounded Texan's body quivered with the shock of the hot lead that hammered into his pain-wracked form. Jaw set, he emptied his gun at the flash with his left hand. His battered body wilted. He rolled over, lay limp upon his back.

The hawk-nosed Cherokee, smoking weapon in his hand, dropped cautiously down the porch steps. Satisfaction in his smouldering eyes, the 'breed stealthily approached, watching the helpless Texan.

In a paroxysm of impotent anger, Tex made one last demand upon his fast-waning strength. His shoulders left the

ground, and, with a curse, he hurled the empty forty-five at the advancing form. Again he collapsed, strength spent.

With a throaty chuckle, Cherokee dodged the clumsily flung missile. Mind at ease, he strode into the lamplight towards the blood-soaked form, stood gloating above Tex's slack body. "Wal, Texan," there was triumph in his deep voice, "seems like you done rode your last ride."

With a groan, the hard-hit rider peered up at the swarthy features of his enemy with pain-weary eyes.

"Yessir," went on Cherokee, plugging out his empties. "I'd say you was as good as buzzard bait right now. Still got the gold on your mind, eh?"

He slid fresh loads into the cylinder. "Wal, when a horse breaks a leg, a feller slams a slug into its conk out of kindness. Reckon I should do the same for you." His tone changed, became thick with venom. "You cow-hocked, sneaking tarantula. If I had time I'd handle you like I handled Coyote. He was plenty tough, Texan, but the cuss was shrieking like a woman before you bulled in."

The wounded man stretched on the ground, feebly plucked at his belt with his left hand.

"You can die knowing you did me a favor." Cherokee jerked his head at the buckskin. "I can sure use another horse to pack the gold. Wal, you're through making trouble for me. This is it!" He thumbed back the hammer of his six-gun.

The Texan's left hand flicked out from beneath his waistband, grasping a squat derringer. Before the surprised 'breed divined his intent, it spat fire once—twice. Amazement in his glazing eyes, Cherokee rocked slowly, striving to remain erect. The gun slipped out of his weakening grasp and dropped down upon the body of the man at his feet. A tremor shook his big frame. His legs caved, he crumbled and his lifeless form flopped across the Texan.

"The rattlesnake never figured I was packing an ace in the hole," muttered the wounded man, his drawn features twisting into the ghost of a grin. The weight of the 'breed's body was heavy upon him. He twisted, slowly squirming free.

The right side of his body seemed dead. Foot by foot, he wormed towards the porch, his thoughts on the helpless prisoner inside. A red smear marked his labored, gasping progress across the hard ground.

As though from vast distance, Tex heard a curiously familiar voice. Dreamily he listened:

"I am a lonesome cowpoke  
I got a bald-faced bay,  
Sometimes I'm fat, but most I'm broke,  
But then I just roll me a smoke,  
I guess that's all today."

He opened his eyes. His surroundings, too, seemed familiar. He turned his head towards the direction of the sound. In a bed beside him, Peewee was propped up by pillows. A writing tablet lay on his knees and he was chewing the end of a pencil, scowling, evidently deep in the throes of composition.

"Say." The Texan's voice was a hoarse whisper. "Is that a disease, or do you figure to grow out of it?"

Peewee dropped his pencil and released a yell. "Heck, I figured you was headed for the Golden Gates. Ain't heard a peep out of you since that Wells Fargo guy packed you in five days back." He held up his pad. "What you heard, pard, was the forty-ninth verse of *The Lonesome Cowboy*. Want I should read 'em?"

"Nope," returned Tex faintly but forcibly.

"Ain't nobody will listen." The squat puncher's voice was glum. "Some day you jaspers are gonna be sorry. Ain't everyone can string words together and make 'em rhyme—proper."

"Thank Gawd," whispered his companion, turned over and slept.

Sometime later voices again woke the wounded Texan. Listlessly, he opened his eyes. His glance fell upon Margery Lawson, standing by the bed and his lethargy fell away. "Howdy," he croaked.

"Why, Tex, you're conscious again." Her voice thrilled with

excitement. "Jim Jeffries says you had lost so much blood Pete Powers wouldn't have packed you back from Ghost Gulch if he hadn't known I'd have shot him if he left you behind."

The wounded Texan tried to sit up, but abandoned the attempt. His right arm was bandaged across his chest and his right leg seemed to be in splints. "Figured I was a goner," he mumbled.

Margery hovered over him, straightening his covers and arranging his pillows. "So did Jeffries," she assured him. "Doctor Barton dug two bullets out of your shoulder, your right leg is broken and your right arm is—quite badly injured."

For a while the patient lay pondering. So Powers was a Wells Fargo man, and Cherokee had him trussed. His last recollection of Ghost Gulch was gunning Cherokee with the derringer he had stuck beneath his waistband.

"How come Pete Powers got tangled up in the fracas?" he croaked.

Margery sat on the edge of the bed. "Now, don't excite yourself," she cautioned. "Just listen. When you escaped from Jim Jeffries, the Wells Fargo detective was out in the Barrens, trying to track you down. He must have ridden into Ghost Gulch just before you arrived. That horrible Cherokee trapped him and was threatening to torture him, as he had poor Coyote Cal, when you saved his life."

"So they got the deadwood on that diamondback?" The wounded man's weak voice was strained with eagerness.

She smiled. "I should say they did. All the valley knows that that horrible Cherokee tortured Coyote. You don't have to worry any more, Tex."

"The gold?"

Margery shrugged. "What does it matter about the gold as long as you get well. Isn't it wonderful, Tex, to know that you are a free man again?"

Mending slowly, Tex had plenty of time for thought as he lay on his bed on the screened porch of the doctor's home.



Again and again he pondered upon his last visit to Ghost Gulch. One fact was plain—the gold was still there. Cherokee had said he intended to use the buckskin to help pack it away. And, considered the wounded man, he was flat broke, with a doctor bill that was already as long as his arm. Not that Doc Barton would press for his dinero—half the valley owed him money. But if he could locate that gold, Wells Fargo's 25 percent bounty would yield enough to rebuild and restock the Teepee and still leave plenty in the bank. Now that the Hobbled O had ceased to exist and Cherokee's gang of rustlers was wiped out, all the range north of Rattlesnake Creek could be his. With Margery as his wife and Peewee as foreman, he would be in clover. But this was all dreams, just dreams, he considered despondently. The secret of the stolen gold had been buried with Cherokee. Jim Jeffries had told him that the Wells Fargo detective had hired a dozen men and combed the gulch from end to end—to find nothing.

But the gold was there!

Within a month Tex was on his feet, still weak, but able to get around. His right arm, bound against his chest, was still useless. Peewee, long since declared convalescent, had headed back to Hope Valley.

Then, one dark day, Dr. Barton hurled a thunderbolt that reduced the Texan to black despair—he would never use his gun-arm again!

"Why, whatever has come over you, Tex?" demanded the puzzled Margery, when he greeted her gloomily and slumped listlessly upon a chair. In flat, hopeless tones he told her of the doctor's revelation.

"Plenty of one-armed men enjoy life," she protested. "Look at Sam, the jailer. He has probably forgotten he ever had two arms. He's happy."

"And the jasper's a roustabout," added Tex tonelessly. "Just a bum who never has a dollar. That's what I'll be. What can I do? I can't rope, can't handle stock, can't use a gun worth a

damn, and I'm flat broke. You best get shut of me, Marg—I'm through!"

All her entreaties, arguments, even taunts, failed to cheer him.

One tiny gleam of hope pricked through the fog of despair that settled on the crippled Texan—there was gold in Ghost Gulch. If only he could nose it out, he could drag his feet out of this morass of hopelessness that bogged him down.

The longer he pondered upon the idea, the more powerful it became. Until, finally, it grew into an obsession.

One morning, before dawn, he stole from his bed on the doctor's screened porch, injuned out to the barn in the rear and saddled the buckskin awkwardly with his good arm. He packed no chuck, carried no water, even left his gun-belt behind—what use was an iron to a man whose gun-hand was forever crippled?

The way he saw it, he was heading towards Ghost Gulch to die. Better that, he considered, than live out his life alone, dependent for his existence upon the bounty of others. Maybe begging for his bread. Who had any use for a one-armed puncher?

He didn't know that Mrs. Smithers, the doctor's nurse, aroused by the stomping hooves in the barn, saw him ride. Nor did he see another rider, forking an ancient cow pony, who pulled out from town thirty minutes later, dogging the black dot ahead that dipped up and down across the swales.

That night he laid over at the Circle R line cabin again. No one had apparently been around since his last visit and there was no coffee or chuck on the shelf. He was rolling a smoke with his left hand, and marvelling how quickly a fellow could pick up the knack, when the thud of hooves outside drew him to the door.

Margery, garbed in the denims and grey shirt of homesteading days, reined up. She lifted a well-filled gunny sack off the horn and walked calmly past him into the cabin. First she eyed the cold stove, then the Texan's baffled features. "You can gather wood with one hand," she reminded him.

Too bewildered to protest, Tex brought in an armful of wood from the stack behind the cabin. The girl started a fire and quickly the fragrant aroma of boiling coffee mingled with the appetizing odor of frying steak and potatoes.

He leaned against the doorpost, watching somberly as she set places for two. "Say, what's the idea?" he demanded.

"You need a companion and I'm riding to Ghost Gulch with you," she threw carelessly over her shoulder, as she busied herself at the stove.

"Who claimed I was riding to the gulch?"

"You've thought of nothing else for days, possessed by the crazy idea that you must have money, that you're a burden to folks, just because you can't use one arm."

"You got to get out of here," he objected helplessly. "Heck, your reputation—"

"Marry me and save it!" He could not bring himself to meet the challenge in her blue eyes.

She pulled up a box chair, "Let's eat before the food is cold, and don't tell me you don't need someone to look after you—even a greenhorn wouldn't ride into the Barrens without food or water."

Ghost Gulch simmered beneath a searing sun when they rode out of the rock passage.

"What an awful place!" Margery's voice was hushed as she eyed the crumbling ghost town, silent and sunbaked, the mouldering shacks, the grim cliffs that frowned down upon them, polished slate-smooth by the storm of centuries, dabbed with great splotches, dull-red and soot-black.

They dismounted outside the bungalow. Tex noted that the buzzards and coyotes had done a good job on Cherokee. Little remained of the 'breed except torn remnants of clothing and scattered bones.

He mounted the porch, Margery behind him. "The gold's here, but where do we hunt for it?" he demanded with a rueful grin, swinging his good arm in a circle. "I guess that

Wells Fargo jasper and his gang raked over the whole danged gulch."

"Where was it first buried by Coyote?" she inquired. He stepped to the end of the porch, pointed to the patch of bare earth, in which the empty trunk still sat, half-buried.

The girl eyed the spot thoughtfully. "I have a feeling it's there," she declared. "If only we know where to place our hands on it." Her forehead knitted. "Cherokee was tricky, he always did the unexpected."

"You said it," chuckled Tex. Margery's company, and her cool commonsense, had already ripped away his cloak of despondency. "'Member he drove Rock's stock back into the same canyon? Who'd ever hunt the cows in the same spot—twice?"

"The same spot!" Her voice rose with quick excitement. "Tex, I'm going to dig up the ground around that trunk again!"

"You're loco!" he protested. But she clambered over the porch rail, dropped down and grabbed the abandoned spade. With good-humored tolerance, Tex rolled a smoke and watched her dig. She'd soon get tired of throwing dirt.

But the girl persisted, despite the heat. Gradually she excavated a shallow trench around the trunk. The cigarette almost dropped from the Texan's lips when she cried, her voice high with excitement, "There's something hard down here, wrapped in sacking!" and spaded the loose earth with redoubled vigor.

Coyote's gold, looted gold, gold for which blood had been spilled and men had died, was once again exposed to the light of day. Leather pouches, grimed with dirt, were stacked higher and higher as a breathless girl and a one-armed man yanked them out of the yielding earth.

At last the two perspiring, triumphant treasure-seekers probed the loose ground in vain and stood with glistening faces, eyeing their haul.

Tex drew a deep breath. His good arm slid around Margery's

waist. "Say!" he said—and his voice was not quite steady—"Ain't this just too wonderful to be true!"

"Dreams always come true," she responded softly, leaning against him. "If only you hope—and expect—hard enough."

"Snap out of it!" A harsh voice grated upon their ears. Astounded, they spun around. A few paces distant stood a square-set rider in checked shirt and pants thrust into high-topping riding boots. Only his eyes, bleak and implacable, were visible through the black silk mask that hid his face. A triggerless Colt was levelled in his right hand . . . a girl with blazing eyes and a fuming Texan, with a useless gun-arm bandaged against his chest, watched their dreams fade as a rider jogged past the empty shacks of Ghost Gulch, leading a buckskin and a paint, each laden with pouched gold.

## CHAPTER 22

WORDLESSLY, Tex and Margery eyed the masked rider until he disappeared through the gloomy portals of the gulch. Then Margery exploded. "To think of it!" she cried, her voice ringing with indignation. "After all, we—you've been through, that wretched holdup man steals the gold from under our very noses! It's maddening!"

"Our chuck, too," added the Texan. "We're in a jackpot, Marg. We can't get out of this danged hole without horses, and we sure ain't got a bite to eat."

"Right now I'm so mad I don't care if I ever eat," declared the girl. Then she buried her face against Tex's chest. "Oh I'm so disappointed," she sobbed.

Tex held her tightly. "Seems to me," he commented, "a certain person was claiming a while back that dinero didn't amount to a damn."

Margery wiped her eyes. "It's not exactly that, but Coyote's gold meant so much—to us."

"Don't I know it!" he agreed feelingly, "but right now we got to figure how to keep alive—and that won't be no cinch!"

With sober faces they sat on the porch of the bungalow and

considered their dilemma. Weeks might pass before anyone visited Ghost Gulch, and there was always the chance that a band of marauding Apaches might sweep through. "We got to leg it," decreed Tex ultimately. "We got a mighty slim chance to pull through, but we'll have no chance at all if we stick around 'til we're half-starved and weakened."

"How far is Skull Creek?" asked Margery.

"Forty miles or more, but we'll hit water on Rattlesnake, which ain't more than thirty miles."

She shuddered. "Thirty miles through this horrible wilderness. The heat will kill us."

"We'll hoof it nights. Maybe we should start right away."

"Let's wait one more day," she begged. "Maybe something, or someone will turn up."

Tex stirred on the mattress he had dragged out upon the porch. Above him the rising sun laid a gold band across the cliff top; a band that slowly widened as the sun crept higher.

For a while, he lay pondering upon their predicament. Then, plainly, he heard hooves. In an instant, he was on his feet, head pivoting as he searched for the source of the sound. A rider was dropping down from the entrance to the gulch, with two ponies on the lead. Scarce able to grasp their good fortune, Tex eyed the stranger, recognized Jeffries' spare form.

He became aware that Margery had stepped out of the house and stood beside him. "I never thought I'd ever be so tickled to lamp a lawman," he admitted, with quirked lips. "And damned if he ain't brought our ponies back!"

Jeffries reined up by the porch. "You playing Adam and Eve?" he inquired dryly.

"Well, it seems the devil has entered Paradise," countered Margery, "But," she added with a smile, "we certainly are glad to see him."

"You get the gold?" asked Tex.

"Every dollar."

"And the masked man?"

"If you have Fleeson in mind, Pete Powers is packing him to Skull Creek right now."

"Not Fleet Fleeson, the horse breeder!"

"The same!" Jeffries stepped down and rolled a smoke. "Rest your legs, folks," he invited, fading blue eyes twinkling. "Mebbe I can make it plain." It was evident the deputy was in great good humor.

He hunkered against the porch, touched a match to his smoke and pushed his battered Stetson back off his brow. "When Pete Powers rode in, a while back, he was hot on your trail, Tex. Seems that Coyote Cal was once Slick Sam, who rode with the Darnell gang, holdup artists. If I'd had the brains of a bee I'd have recognized him and slipped a thousand dollars into my jeans. Pete hurrahed me about it. Wal, I got to chewing it over. If you hadn't cleaned out the gold, Tex, it was plain someone else had. It seems that Jules Darnell, who rodded the gang, was wounded. Pete figured him dead. I took a pasear up to Butte City and spent a full day in the sheriff's office, pawing over old dodgers. Sure enough, I find one of Jules Darnell, five thousand dollars reward, dead or alive. Shave off Fleeson's whiskers and it was him to the life. Get the idea? When that pair of miscreants slipped through the fingers of the law in Texas, they beat it out here and laid low. Darnell sprouts a beard and becomes Fleeson, the horse breeder. Slick Sam grabs a new handle, Coyote Cal, and fakes he's a prospector. He spreads it around that he's tapped a rich vein in Ghost Gulch—which covered the spending of the gold, not that they had a chance to spend much.

"Cherokee beefs Coyote and cleans out the cache, which leaves Fleeson out on a limb. But the jasper was slick. He had a hunch the loot was still around, so he kept cases on the gulch. Wal, his hunch paid off."

Jeffries paused, evidently enjoying the rapt attention of his audience.

"Wal, to finish the yarn, I burns up the trail to Skull Creek, picks up Powers and hotfoots for Fleeson's ranch. Damme if he don't ride in, leading your buckskin, Texan, and a hunk of

hoss flesh." The deputy eyed Margery reproachfully, "It would be a kindness to shoot that poor old chunk of crow bait, ma'am."

"How dare you!" she flashed. "Shoot Butterbeans—the very idea!"

Jeffries' lean features crinkled, "Wal, Fleeson, that is to say, Darnell, got rambunctious, and—like I said—Pete's packing him to Skull Creek—across the saddle. He's still worth five thousand. I had a hunch the loot was hidden up here and I knew your horses. So I hit for the gulch—figuring you were deader'n two cans of corned beef."

"We're very much alive," said Margery, "but we're awfully glad you took the trouble to find out."

"Darnell run a sandy over you?"

"Sure." Tex's voice was bitter. He told of finding the loot and the unexpected holdup.

"Reckon he figured he earned that gold," murmured the deputy. "In a way of speaking, he had. Wal, someone draws maybe thirty, forty thousand Wells Fargo bounty out of this deal. That won't be hard to take."

"Not for you," flung the girl, "after we found it."

"Now don't crawl my hump," expostulated Jeffries mildly. "Maybe you should hear me out."

"We're listening," put in Tex.

"Wal, I figured a three-way split. That should give us ten thousand apiece, and I draw another five for putting the finger on Darnell."

"Oh, Mr. Jeffries." Margery's eyes were shining. "You can't mean it."

"Never was so serious in my life, ma'am." The gnarled old deputy straightened. "Heck, what would I do with forty thousand dollars? Fifteen thousand puts me in clover."

Peewee's homely grin greeted them when they rode into Skull Creek, Margery leaving for her cabin. The deputy and the two pards pushed through the batwings of The Four Aces, which swarmed with citizens.



Jeffries ordered drinks, but Mike held up his hand when payment was tendered. "Today, gentleman, all drinks are on the house," he announced.

"How come?" inquired the deputy.

The barkeep nodded at a tall form circulating among the crowded tables. "Miss Juanita's getting spliced." He lowered his voice, "Faith and my sympathy goes out to the man." Tex turned, but could only catch a glimpse of the groom's back. Who, he wondered, could have bridled the fiery Juanita?

The trio retired to a side table. Tex related their adventures in Ghost Gulch to Peewee. "Jim Jeffries," he concluded, "is splitting the bounty. Ain't we lucky?"

Peewee seemed amused. "Wal, what's eating you?" demanded his pard.

"You talk like we're busted. Heck, Rock's had a crew in Hope Valley for two weeks, and they done built a house that'll knock your eye out. Then our cows was in the bunch Silent drove from the canyon, but when the Circle R turned 'em back, seems they all had twins—big twins, two-year-olds. Rock says we got it coming."

"By jove. The very man I yearned to meet!" At sound of the familiar drawl, Tex looked up, "A million thanks, old chap, for returning the watch, I value it above everything, except—of course—Juanita."

"Wal, if it ain't Hyphen," exclaimed the Texan, "slicked out in full war paint."

Truly Chauncey Wythington-Smythe was at his best. A pair of striped pants, with knife-edge creases, adorned his long legs. A frock coat was draped upon his shoulders with a white flower blooming in the lapel. Beneath a low-cut waistcoat, with silk piping, a starched shirt with high collar showed spotless white. Patent leather shoes with mirror-like surface, neatly knotted tie and tall beaver hat completed the ensemble.

"Funeral?" inquired Peewee solemnly.

"My word, I should say not!" The Dude beamed. "You behold a man thrice blessed. Gentlemen, I am about to be mar-

ried." Observing their puzzled glances, he explained hastily, "I am marrying the most beautiful girl in Arizona."

"Margery!" ejaculated Peewee, "You dawgoned hawse-thief!"

"Correction, old chap," The Dude's glance was pained. "Juanita."

"By gosh, that reminds me," interjected Tex, rising hastily. "I got business—important business."

He hurried out of the saloon, cut across Main Street and headed for Margery's little house beside the Trading Post.

She met him at the door, a smiling Margery in neat white shirtwaist, with a perky bonnet perched upon her coppery hair.

"Say, Marg," he cried eagerly, "Hyphen's getting spliced, and—"

"So are you." She slipped her hand beneath his arm. "Mrs. Smithers made all the arrangements before I left."

Back in The Four Aces, Peewee was left alone at the side table. Around him men jostled. The air was heavy with floating tobacco smoke and filled with the rumble of voices. But the squat rider was oblivious to it all. Staring at the blackened rafters, an abstracted look in his eyes, he was in the throes of composition:

"Hyphen ropes a wildcat  
And plenty coin to boot;  
Texas grabs the Queen of Hearts  
The cream of all the loot;  
All I draw is my old bay,  
But, hell, who gives a hoot!"

TURN OVER BOOK FOR 2nd NOVEL

A "Dead" Man Sparks the Fires  
of Rancher Rivalry

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